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#14

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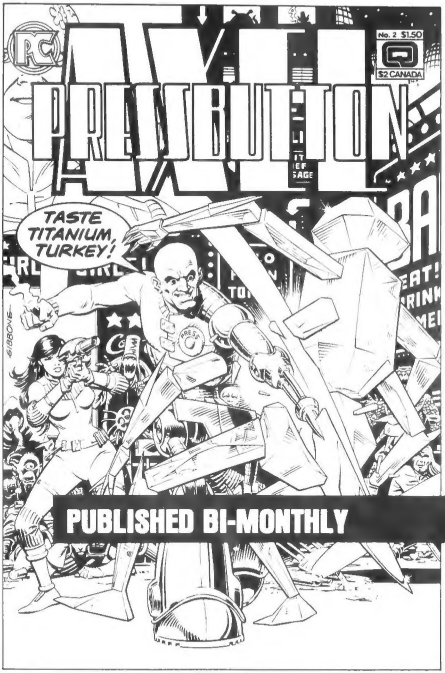

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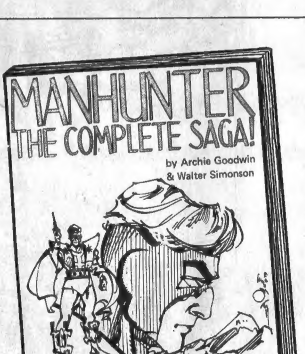

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UP FRONT

WHAT HAPPENED TO HEMBECK?

Those who saw early ads for this issue, or who read the next issue blurb in #13 last month, are probably wondering: "What happened to Hembeck?"

It's not his fault.

Fred was ready, willing and able to Destroy the Marvel Universe right on schedule — but, alas, Marvel has slapped a moratorium on its destruction at Hembeck's hands, at least until after we see whether said same Universe survives the Secret Wars.

So, in the interim, while the Secret Wars are raging strong, with the fate of the Marvel Universe hanging in the balance — and all comicdom awaits the ultimate outcome — the friendly folks at Marvel have supplied their side of the story. I am happy to offer you this timely inside look at the most-talked-about series in the history of comics.

However, rest assured, Hembeck *will* be Destroying the Marvel Universe at a later date. And COMICS INTERVIEW will cover this catastrophic event "to the max."

In the meanwhile, a behind-the-scenes spotlight on the secrets behind the Secret Wars follows — sort of a dispatch from the front lines. It is the most up to date, up to the minute interview we have yet published!

-Dave

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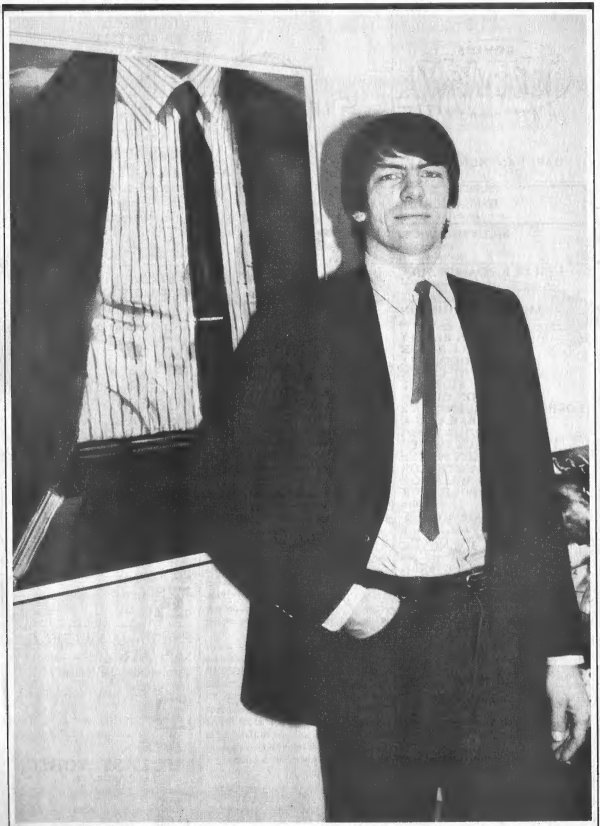
"SECRET WARS is an idea that was created



when Stan Lee started the Marvel Universe."

MARVEL SUPER HEROES™ SECRET WARS

It's no secret what series is the year's runaway sales success — it's MARVEL SUPER HEROES SECRET WARS (to call the twelve-part epic by its full and formal title). Jim Salicrup spoke with the writer/creator of SECRET WARS — Marvel's editor-in-chief, Jim Shooter — to find out the origin of the best-selling (and often controversial) super-hero extravaganza and — just maybe — persuade the Master Planner of the Marvel Universe to spill some secrets about the war's outcome . . .

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JIM SALICRUP: *How did the SECRET WARS first start? Where did the idea come from?*

JIM SHOOTER: Ever since I began here at Marvel, I've been getting suggestions — hundreds and hundreds in the mail, from readers — that a lot of our major characters, or all of our major characters, should be together in one story. And really it's an idea that was created when **Stan Lee** started the Marvel Universe and had characters all in a consistent universe and always running into each other and reading about each other in the papers and so on. Sooner or later, it had to happen. Some event would be so large, so all-encompassing, that it would bring together a large number of the major characters. So in essence I was fulfilling the destiny of the Marvel Universe from its inception, and also answering a request that I'd gotten, you know, literally thousands of times over the course of the years, by creating this storyline whereby they actually were thrown together for one adventure.

JIM: *You've worked with lots of characters lots of times — in THE AVENGERS and THE LEGION OF SUPER HEROES — how do you do that? How do you keep them all straight?*

SHOOTER: I think the key to it, and kind of a trademark of a **Jim Shooter** story, is that in each story a character or a few characters will emerge as the focus — and the other characters have important but lesser roles. And I think that, you know, it's very easy to get carried away and have all kinds of stuff going on that seems exciting to you, but when someone else tries to read it it's like a Swedish movie, without subtitles. It's too hard to follow and you miss a lot of what's going on. So I made a special effort to try to keep things clear. I know that when I'm reading works by great novelists, I never have any trouble knowing who the characters are. Reading **Hemingway**, I have no problem following the characters or concepts. That's not because it's less sophisticated than some of the group comic-books that are published. That's because it's more sophisticated and done with more craft. So I try to be as artful as I can, and to tell the story as well as and as clearly as possible.

JIM: *Once you decided you were going to do the SECRET WARS, was there input from other writers? How did the actual plot come about?*

SHOOTER: As soon as I announced I was doing this, and that I had a vague

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BY CHRISTY MARX AND MIKE VOSBURG

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"Basically, I had all the best writers in the business helping me with my story."

general plan to have certain characters involved — well, the first reaction I got was a kind of fear. *(Laughter.)* "Oh, my God, the X-Men are going to do what?" But after the initial shock I found that **Chris Claremont** and **John Byrne** and a lot of other writers actually got real interested, and instead of resisting the idea or worrying about what I was doing, they got actively involved. My phone was constantly ringing, with **John Byrne** or someone saying, "I've got another great idea! I've got a development you can do that will feed into one of my plot-lines!" Chris had some things that were going in on THE NEW MUTANTS and THE X-MEN — it was if he had planned them to fit with what I had suggested. Everything he was doing fit so well with what I had come up with — and both his story and my story grew as a result of our discovery — that we already had this happy alliance. Basically, I had all the best writers in the business helping me with my story. It lived up to its intention. It really was integral to all the continuity that was going on in all the books because those writers were plotting it, along with me, and they made it very important to the lives of their characters.

You know, a lot of fuss was made about Spider-Man coming back in a new costume, and that's fine. There were kind of a couple of big, obvious changes that took place, but the point is — it really has less to do with that than with the subtle things. A lot of big changes have taken place with characters in THE X-MEN — Magneto, for example — that either took place in THE SECRET WARS or progressed quite a bit in the course of THE SECRET WARS. That was all a designed play. Chris was doing stories in THE X-MEN and I was laying the groundwork for some of them — even though my stories were coming out after his, because of the way the series was scheduled. But the point is that the subtle developments and the way they all dovetail and the way the whole thing hangs in continuity, is really our proudest accomplishment.

JIM: *You mentioned intentions. When all is said and done, what is it that you set out to accomplish?*

SHOOTER: I just wanted to do a really great story that was kind of the fulfillment of the Marvel Universe plan, wherein the characters all know each other — I wanted to answer all those letters that always requested a story so big that it involved a great number of characters, if not all of them. You know, aside, I wanted to do what I always want to do — which is to tell a very interesting, exciting story to the best of my ability, and I gave it all I had. I made it the best story I could make it. I tried to make it live up to the billing as the most significant event in comics in the last two decades.

JIM: *Some people may have interpreted it as each character going through major changes, and they're judging it that way. You know, saying, "All they did was change Spider-Man's costume." That wasn't what you set out to do?*

SHOOTER: Oh, no. There have been rumors flying around in recent years, every time you turn around, that some characters were dying, or that there's going to be some big revolutions in this and that character. And the point — the thing that's really happening — is that the characters are *always* changing. They're always evolving. Of course, there are changes taking place in the characters in THE SECRET WARS. How could there not be? How could anyone go through an experience like that and not have some changes, in their personality or in their concept of the universe? But I didn't set out to have everyone come back with an arm missing, or a funny hat. That was not the point. That had nothing to do with it. I think people leaped to that conclusion because Spider-Man came back in a different costume and it caused such a

A pressing problem for the Good Guys. From the cover of SECRET WARS #4. Art by Bob Layton.

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THEY CALL THEMSELVES MANDES
THEY ARE FANATICALLY DEDICATED TO AN EVIL CREED OF RACIAL SUPERIORITY AND POLITICAL INTOLERANCE
THEY WANT CANADA NOW
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"I just wanted to do a really great story."

furor. I'm sorry I disappointed them *(laughter)*, you know, by not having Thor come back in a business suit, but that was not the idea. The idea was to have just an incredible story. And all of the consequences, and all of the fallout from it, should — and was — natural. It was as it should have been.

JIM: *If you were to advise a writer how to script his own SECRET WARS, step-by-step, what would you say?*

SHOOTER: Well, the steps were pretty much the same as with any story. I had to think about the major points of the story. I had to think of what the major conflict would be, the major climax, and then I had to think of events I would use to build toward a major climax, to develop the conflict, and how I was going to introduce the conflict and bring the characters on stage — the technical part of writing. I had to think of that stuff first. Then I had to think about putting flesh on the bones. All of the intricacies of the sub-plots, and the interactions of the characters. Almost all of what I said grows out of the characters. I mean, everyone here knows what Captain America will say or do in any situation, so you put him in a situation, and he tells you what he's going to say or do. Then that dictates what will happen. You think, "Well, if that happened, this other guy wouldn't stand still for that. He'd have to say something." I did a lot of looking into these characters and —

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JIM: *If I could interrupt you for a second, how did you select the characters?*

SHOOTER: Well, that also has to do with the story. I naturally started thinking of it in terms of major Marvel characters. But as I really got an idea as to what the comic book would be, and who the mysterious author of all this stuff was — the Beyonder — then the main consideration would be, "Who would *he* choose?" and "Who would choose to go and who wouldn't?" because they basically chose themselves. And why? What is his motive? And what is the underlying scheme to all this? There is the face value, which everyone including the characters accepted, which was, "Hey, it's some kind of gladiatorial thing, he's brought together a group of people and he wants us to fight it out." Which, of course, is not true at all. But that's what the obvious thing seemed to be, to them, and to the readers. That was the face value, but it evolves into far more than that. And when you find out the real motives of the Beyonder and the other characters involved, you begin to see why each character is there. And as I figured all this out, that told me who was going to be here and who wasn't going to be. But anyway, you get these characters together, and they start telling you what the story is. You begin to realize things about the characters maybe you wouldn't realize until you really have them in this situation. That's really the essence of conflict. You know you have a good conflict for the character when you wonder, "What would Captain America do?" The only way to really delve into these characters and get to know them is to think through these things in terms of conflict and really decide what they would do. And I've had to do more of that in *this* series than anyone has had to do with *any* series— because there are so many of them, and there's so much conflict. A lot of people had never seen these characters in these kinds of situations before, and were kind of taken aback to see some of the things that happened.

The X-Men play an independent — but important role — in SECRET WARS.

JIM: *For example — ?*

SHOOTER: Well, a lot of people said that they had been reading THE X-MEN and had seen Magneto making a steady progression to being less of a megalomaniacal madman badguy and more understanding and questioning, more objective. And having seen that in THE X-MEN, and then seeing Magneto in SECRET WARS with the Wasp and Captain America, they say, "Hey, they're treating him as if he's a villain, but he's not!" But the Wasp and Captain America don't know that. All they know is that this guy has been real hostile and has tried to kill them on a number of occasions. I mean, up close and personal, he tried to kill

"When you find out the Beyonder's real

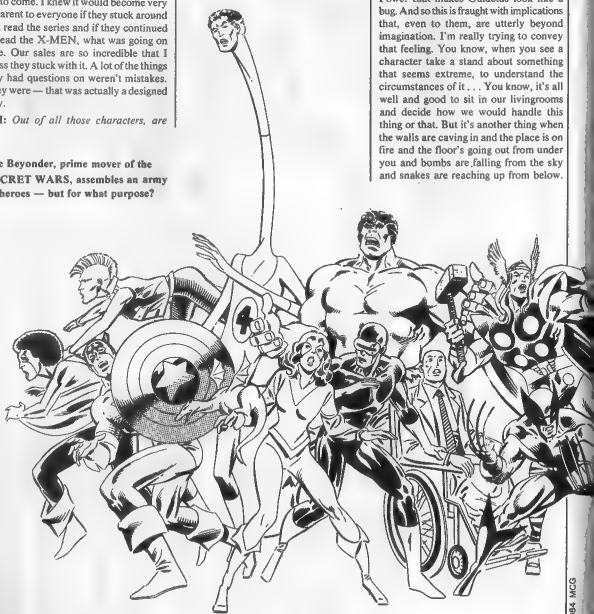
them! And they know this. All they see is a mass murderer. They don't know that he's taken steps since then.

JIM: *And why would they care?*

SHOOTER: Yeah, why would they care? Some readers look at it and say, "Why are they doing that?" But as the series develops it becomes clearer to them — and also if they just think about it, it becomes clearer. This is something we worked out with Chris. This is all part of his master plan for continuing developments that will occur in X-MEN. In a way, I was laying the groundwork for stuff that is already happening and stuff that is yet to come. I knew it would become very apparent to everyone if they stuck around and read the series and if they continued to read the X-MEN, what was going on here. Our sales are so incredible that I guess they stuck with it. A lot of the things they had questions on weren't mistakes. They were — that was actually a designed play.

JIM: *Out of all those characters, are there any that are your favorites? Or that you prefer writing, more than others?*

SHOOTER: Not really. I find that any character I'm writing that has anything to write about, that has some conflict, that has some personality to explore, I can really get into it. I think the hardest thing I had to do was admit to myself that I just don't have enough issues in the series to focus as much as I'd like on individual characters. Nightcrawler, for instance, at this point in the series, hasn't had his time to be center stage. I really tried to convey the feeling to everyone, of what it would be like to be swept away to another planet, to see a planet put together before your very eyes. Even for these characters, they're seeing a galaxy destroyed! *Phhfft!* Gone! It's not just another day at the plant. This is not only something of enormous significance, this is also possibly the last significant thing that will ever happen. Everything is hanging on this. They're dealing with consequences that are unimaginable — with power on a scale that's just beyond anything any of them, including Thor, have ever witnessed. Power that makes Galactus look like a bug. And so this is fraught with implications that, even to them, are utterly beyond imagination. I'm really trying to convey that feeling. You know, when you see a character take a stand about something that seems extreme, to understand the circumstances of it . . . You know, it's all well and good to sit in our livingrooms and decide how we would handle this thing or that. But it's another thing when the walls are caving in and the place is on fire and the floor's going out from under you and bombs are falling from the sky and snakes are reaching up from below.



The Beyonder, prime mover of the SECRET WARS, assembles an army of heroes — but for what purpose?

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motives, you see why each character is there."

(Laughter.) Of course, Captain America's reaction always is, "Well, I've been in tougher scrapes!"

JIM: *Well, were there any characters — looking at this from another angle — where you felt the potential was already tapped out?*

SHOOTER: It's amazing. I know there's one school of thought that the so-called "established" characters were kind of used up and you couldn't do anything with them. And I always thought that was baloney. If you've been looking at THOR lately, or THE AVENGERS, you know that's not the case. And I found there was just endless opportunity with them. Because as long as I really was getting into their personalities and the conflict, they would have, and playing them out, I never had the feeling that anyone was greater or lesser. I never had the feeling, "I can't do anything with this guy." They all had such great possibilities. There are certain people at other companies who would rather introduce what we would call "throwaway" characters, because — they figure they can have them go through changes because no one will object, where you couldn't go hanging characters who had become "institutions." But here there are no sacred cows. And I feel that the ones who have become "institutions" probably became popular for a reason. Probably because they are so great and have so much potential, and the only mistake you can make with them is to leave the potential lie there. You must move on and continue to create, or else you might as well hang it up. So a character like Thor gets me as excited with all his possibilities and potentials as I did when I was a kid reading THOR back in the Sixties.

JIM: *How do you actually work on the book itself? I seem to recall, when you were working on THE LEGION OF SUPER HEROES, you actually used to lay out each page, as you wrote the copy. How are you working now?*

SHOOTER: Well, this was the first time I'd worked with **Mike Zeck**, so at first we waffled around a bit, trying to find the best way to work with each other. At the begining I was writing plots, and Mike was drawing from them. I think that eventually we sort of segued into me doing the layouts. And when I say a "segue," I kept finding in the plots it was easier to do the sketches of what I wanted

Compare this art to the printed version in the very first issue of SECRET WARS. Helpful hints: Someone isn't rubber-necking — and someone else is missing. Can you find other differences?

Mike Zeck and John Beatty art.

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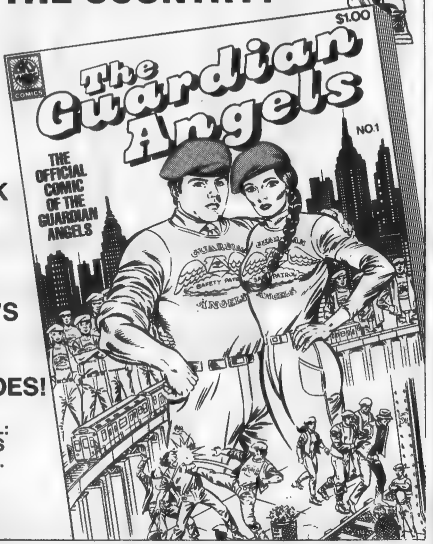

"I was fulfilling the destiny of the Marvel Universe."

One of the most talked-about aspects of SECRET WARS: Spider-Man gets a new costume. Writing by Jim Shooter, art by Mike Zeck and John Beatty.

than it was to spend pages explaining. So very early on there were sequences that I would virtually layout, drawing rough stick figures in small thumbnail sizes. So eventually we decided, "Well, let's do it that way." So from issue #8 on, I've been doing rough layouts about the same size as the printed comic-book page — very rough stick figures, not refined drawings — and they give Mike an idea of camera angle and depth of focus. They give him an idea of what's supposed to be there. I give Mike the layouts and he draws them, improving little things. Naturally, he's doing real drawings and I'm doing stick figures, but he'll change an angle slightly, do special effects, and add detail, so that's working pretty well. I think Mike and I have fundamentally different senses of pacing, which is where we were running afoul a bit in the beginning. I think I have a more staccato sense and his is more lyrical. He tends to do kind of a long, slow thing.

JIM: *Yours is more condensed — you have more happening?*

SHOOTER: I think so. I think Mike opens up a bit. For the sake of a better picture, he has more happening between panels. I like to have things happen *in* the panels. That results often in more panels in the book or more panels on a page. You have to give and take a little bit. I think we have reached the optimum — because he takes what I give him and he makes it **Mike Zeck** art, so we're getting all the benefit of what he does best, and we're getting the story pretty much as I pictured it. The story is more true to itself because of the way I'm pacing it. And **John Beatty** does a good job of inking it.

JIM: *Do you script it from your layouts, or Mike's pencils?*

SHOOTER: It really doesn't matter. The layouts are close enough so that if Mike is ahead of me and I have some pencilled pages to look at while I'm scripting it, that's fine. But there isn't really that much difference between the layouts and the finished pages. So I can write the scripts from my little layouts, which is what I did when I was writing THE LEGION OF SUPER HEROES. I wrote the script and did the layouts at the same time. So this is a little different, but not greatly different.

JIM: *How involved is Tom DeFalco?*

SHOOTER: Well, Tom's the editor. He's in charge. He's absolutely critical. And when I'm working on this I don't pull rank on him. I put my writer hat on and take my editor-in-chief hat off. I go in there, and I'm the writer. And Tom is very helpful. I pitch my plots to him and he always has a lot of good suggestions and gives me a lot of help on plots, and then after the pencils come back, after I write the story from my own layouts, Tom edits the script and usually has some good suggestions. So, anyway, Tom is extremely important and does a lot of work on it.

JIM: *The success has been pretty incredible. I think I heard something about another SECRET WARS upcoming?*

SHOOTER: Yeah, we have another series in the works that's related. I guess you

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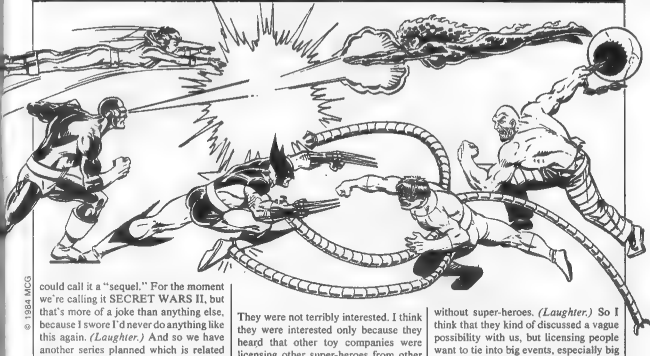

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could call it a "sequel." For the moment we're calling it SECRET WARS II, but that's more of a joke than anything else, because I swore I'd never do anything like this again. *(Laughter.)* And so we have another series planned which is related and I think — well, it's hard to imagine that it wouldn't be related, because it involves everybody, but it certainly won't be the same format.

JIM: *The one thing that attracted me to SECRET WARS is that the suspense is killing me. I want to know, "How is it going to end, for God's sake?" All the stuff with Galactus —*

SHOOTER: Would you believe that **Stan Lee** called me the other day and said, "Jim, I gotta know — how does it end?" *(Laughter.)*

JIM: *How many people know how it's going to turn out?*

SHOOTER: Me and Tom.

JIM: *You didn't tell Stan?*

SHOOTER: I told him a little bit — what he needed to know — because I guess they have people out there who are calling him up to do movies and TV shows built around it. So I don't know what's going to happen with that, but he was really interested in finding out. So I gave him a few hints.

JIM: *What did you tell him?*

SHOOTER: Wouldn't you like to know? *(Laughter.)*

JIM: *Which came first — the toys or this book?*

SHOOTER: This book. I proposed this about a year or two years ago. And we planned — we plan things three years at a time. I had it planned three years ago and had begun work on it when **Mattel Toys** approached us and was interested in perhaps licensing some Marvel characters. They were not terribly interested. I think they were interested only because they heard that other toy companies were licensing other super-heroes from other companies, and I guess they didn't want to be the only toy company on the block without super-heroes. *(Laughter.)* So I think that they kind of discussed a vague possibility with us, but licensing people want to tie into big events, especially big media events that are really going to capture the imagination. That's why there are so many things licensed based on movies or TV shows, because they have such mass exposure. People don't license things that have little exposure or small print-runs because there's no point. You might as well hitch on to something that has a lot of exposure or popularity. I remember when people upstairs who had been talking to the Mattel company asked us, "Are you guys planning anything big?" And we said, "Well, there is this thing called — I think it was called the Universe War, that was the working title — or maybe I called it Cosmic Champions —

JIM: *That was the one I heard.*

SHOOTER: I believe it was Cosmic Champions. I said, "There is this." Their eyes popped out of their heads, So they flew me out to the Coast to tell the people there what I was doing and, you know, sometimes when you get involved in licensing, there's a tendency for the tail to wag the dog. There's a tendency for things to be compromised, because they can't make a toy that has a shield. And I understand that. I understand that they couldn't do exactly what I was doing. And I said, "That's fine. You do what you can, and if you have to make small adaptations, that's fine. But we're doing what we're doing, and this is important to us. This is the whole Marvel Universe. I'm not gonna — " **George Lucas** wouldn't let anybody mess with STAR WARS. I

Captain America — leader of the Good Guys.

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"As long as people care about the characters

Doctor Doom leads the Bad Guys and schemes for "all the marbles."

Detail from Bob Layton's cover for SECRET WARS #6.

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was damned if I was going to let anybody mess with the Marvel Universe. And as a result we kind of understood each other real clearly, real quickly. And the two groups involved — the Mattel people and the Marvel people — began from a position of mutual respect. And I think they did some really fantastic toys, working within the limits they had — three dimensions, molded plastic, stuff like that. And I think we did a really good comic book. And we did not try to compromise them or try to force them to do something they could not do. And they adhered to our stuff and did not do anything that would compromise the integrity of the Marvel Universe. Nor would we have agreed to. And as a result I think it came out very well. I think I heard today that the toy line has sold exactly double what their highest estimates were, so far.

JIM: *That's pretty good.*

SHOOTER: And it tells a lot about the popularity level of the Marvel characters and the fact that they did certainly tie into an event that had enough presence, enough media presence, enough awareness among people, that they made a good choice. And the comic book is the best-selling comic book in the last twenty-five years. Best-selling series. Previously THE X-MEN was the best-selling series. SECRET WARS outsells X-MEN almost two-to-one. And X-MEN outsells almost everything else two-to-one!

JIM: *And X-MEN sales did not go down?*

SHOOTER: Not at all. X-MEN sales have gone up almost dramatically. As a matter of fact, I think because there is a continuity, a lot of crossover, people read SECRET WARS and then go out and try one of the books starring one of the characters who appeared in SECRET WARS. All of our sales have gone up across the line, some astronomically. Amazingly. We set an all-time record for percentage of sales on the newsstands with SPIDER-MAN #252, previously held by THOR, the first one Walt did. And we really created a great deal of interest in what we do. Boy, that's really wonderful — that people are involved that much and really care that much.

JIM: *You mentioned that issue of SPIDER-MAN selling out. I've heard a lot of people complaining about dealers,*

Spider-Woman got a new costume, too.

Art by Bob Layton.

direct dealers, trying to buy up copies as an investment.

SHOOTER: That may be true. I don't know.

JIM: *How do you feel about it?*

SHOOTER: That's really something I can't control. We really didn't set out to engineer that to be an item that collectors and shop owners would buy up. We didn't increase the print-run. We thought it would be the usual-selling issue. We thought it would sell real well — but we didn't anticipate this huge demand, and once it started, there was really nothing we could do about it. In a way, it's nice that people are that interested and that enthusiastic. In another way, I feel bad because there might be people who wanted it and couldn't get it, because the copies were all bought up and they had to pay two dollars or whatever. But I don't know what to do about it. I don't know what we could do to help that situation. I can only say I hope the long-term effect is good. I hope that people are now more interested in SPIDER-MAN and there will generally be more people buying it and there will be more distribution. The small cloud has a big silver lining.

JIM: *You've been going to a lot of conventions. What have they been asking you?*

SHOOTER: Mostly the same as Stan. "My God, how does this come out? *(Laughter.)* Actually, the response at the conventions has been just incredible, overwhelming, enthusiastic. I've never autographed so many comics — and I've autographed a lot of comic books in my time. Everyone seemed to be really inter-

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as much as you care, you've succeeded."

ested and enthusiastic about it. In fact, I'd read a few articles in the fan press, in which people had been complaining about this or that, so I wondered what's going to happen when we go to conventions.

JIM: *You were ready to have them throw rocks.* (Laughter.)

SHOOTER: Yeah, throw rocks or whatever. But much to the contrary, I was mobbed. And **Mike Zeck** and **John Beatty** were at a couple of conventions with me and people seemed to be really into it, really enthusiastic about it, and I was really impressed with the spectrum of the readership. The older readership, the real collectors, seemed to be very enthused, very positive about it — but I also saw some of our younger readers who are typically, I guess, reading some of the more well-known characters and don't get into the X-MEN. You have to have a Ph.D. to read the X-MEN. But some of the people who are not as inclined toward hardcore science-fiction type books, they seem to like SECRET WARS, too. So if we're reaching as many people as we are each month, about three quarters of a million people — we must be reaching a fair broad spectrum, a wide range of people! The convention experience sort of bore that out. I could see that we were having a lot of success.

JIM: *Is there anything more about the SECRET WARS you'd like to say? The fan mail has been all positive, but from what I heard, there have been some complaints from direct dealers themselves ...*

SHOOTER: It's funny. Anyone who's ever complained about it has obviously been reading it every month. *(Laughter.)* And mostly the complaints are the right kind of complaints. **Stan Lee** once told me there are good complaints and bad complaints. If someone comes to you, and is upset about some character, and wants to know how could you do that to him, and so on — anything about a character, then you did fine. As long as people care about the characters as much as you care about the characters, then you've succeeded. You've communicated.

JIM: *I remember when I was editing THE AVENGERS and you were writing it, we got the same thing with Yellowjacket. Up until then, no one could have cared less about what he was doing. But then when you started the storyline, it seemed like pages and pages of fan columns and fanzines were stridently saying you had ruined the character.*

SHOOTER: "Oh, how could he make him suffer like this!" That's what I'm saying. The right kind of complaints — in that period of time, THE AVENGERS sales were just skyrocketing, and we got more mail on THE AVENGERS. As you said earlier, most of the mail is positive. I guess that's why, when you get a negative letter, you're stunned. It stands out so much, because ninety-five to ninety-eight percent of them are very positive, although even within a positive letter there might be something like, "Well, why did you do this?" or "I'm not sure about this." But we get so much positive mail, the complaints stand out. As long as we're inspiring people to have feelings

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AND WHY US? WHY THIS ODD COLLECTION OF BEINGS, MOSTLY FROM EARTH? AND WHY GALACTUS? HE DOESN'T FIT! HUMAN BEINGS AND EVEN GODS MAY BE TEMPTED, BUT GALACTUS IS A FORCE OF NATURE--NO MORE CAPABLE OF HAVING ENEMIES THAN A HURRICANE OR AN EARTHQUAKE! WHY IS ME HERE?
THERE MUST BE MORE TO THIS... BUT WHAT POSSIBLE PURPOSE COULD THERE BE?

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The Fantastic Four's Reed Richards cogitates on the true purpose of the SECRET WARS. From issue #9.

about it, I guess we're doing all right. When people start talking to you about the magnificence of the inker's line, or what clever plot points, or how brilliantly you turned this phrase, or how shiny the staples are, it doesn't matter if they love it or hate it. As long as they're talking about the bricks and the mortar, instead of the house, you've lost them. That's the kiss of death. Even if they're upset with you, if they're talking about the characters, then you've done all right. Stan said that's what he used to get with SPIDER-MAN, all through the Sixties. "Why can't Peter Parker have a girlfriend? Why are you so mean to this guy? Why can't Aunt May get well?" He said, as long as he got that, he knew people really cared about the characters as much as he did. And that was the time that SPIDER-MAN was just going through the roof — like it is now. So he told me that that's how you judge complaints. So the complaints we've been getting on SECRET WARS have been the right kind. And the dealers and distributors, while they've been complaining if Cyclops isn't getting enough time on stage or was missing his wife or whatever, they are at the same time thrilled to have it because it is selling like crazy. Someone in Denver told me he had thought he'd bought enough, because he'd bought twice as many as any comic he'd ever bought before, and he still ran out of them, and was selling back issues for $4.00 — which just amazed me, because the issue was only a couple of months old at that point. So I guess somebody out there likes SECRET WARS.

Reed Richards sets out to learn for himself: Is Galactus the key to the SECRET WARS?

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YES! YES, I WOULD! VERY MUCH!

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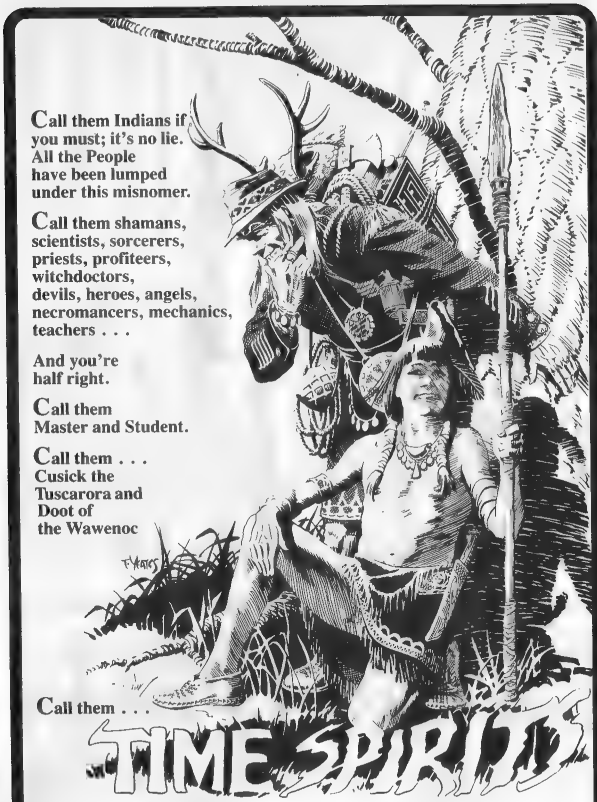
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Call them . . . Cusick the Tuscarora and Doot of the Wawenoc
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TIME SPIRIT
On sale in September from Epic Comics.
by Stephen Perry and Thomas Yeates

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"I want to work for Marvel. We're talking about doing a SILVER SURFER maxi-series."

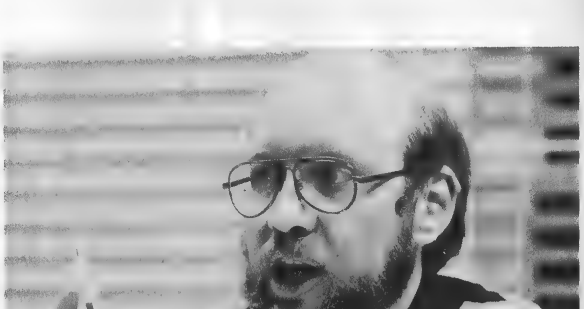

Photo: Mike Catron

ENGLEHART

VITAL STATISTICS

Name: Steve Englehart
Born: Indianapolis — 22 April 1947
Residence: Oakland, California
Occupation: Writer
Training: My father was the top political reporter in the Indiana/Kentucky area. So I grew up in a literate household and have written as far back as I can remember. I don't know whether it was in imitation of my father or whether the genes just got passed on. I never thought I would be a writer. It's primarily an inborn ability to do it, being at the right place at the right time, and an inability to draw.

Comics Credits: THE BATMAN, SCORPIO ROSE, CAPTAIN AMERICA, THE AVENGERS, THE DEFENDERS, COYOTE, DR. STRANGE, etc.

Favorite Comics: AMERICAN FLAGG, V FOR VENDETTA (in WARRIOR magazine),SWAMP THING by Alan Moore, Frank Miller's stuff, CAMELOT 3000, Brian Bolland's stuff

Favorite Director: George Lucas, of course. I like Hitchcock a lot.

Favorite Movie: Harold Pinter's BETRAYAL. It's a writer's movie.

Pet Peeve: Steven Spielberg. He's all mechanics. Since JAWS, I haven't liked anything he's done. I thought E.T. was terrible — I really didn't like it. I wound up working on the E.T. videogame for Atari and had to see it again. It was even worse. *(Laughter.)* I think he's vastly over-rated. I thought TEMPLE OF DOOM was far inferior to RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK, because Lucas was involved in one and not the other, and Lucas doesn't forget that you need characters in addition to roller coasters, you know?

"I wrote GARFIELD. We're not talking great

After a gruelling ordeal at the Omni Hotel in Atlanta, which overbooks seemingly as a matter of policy and refuses to honor reservations that have been confirmed and paid in advance, the COMICS INTERVIEW crew proceeded in a dark frame of mind to attend the 1984 Atlanta Fantasy Fair.

There was, however, a ray of sunshine in the person of stalwart Steve Englehart. We hadn't spoken in a long time, since the days when I was copy editor of his classic Marvel series such as CAPTAIN AMERICA and THE AVENGERS. So we sequestered ourselves in the convention's Security Central room for a catch-up conversation. Part way through, we adjourned to Steve's suite, where I met Mrs. Steve and their son, Alex.

The experience was a pleasant one, which you can share by reading the interview which follows. However, if you wish to share and enjoy the experience of next year's Fantasy Fair in Atlanta, I strongly recommend against reserving a room at the Omni Hotel . . .

DAK: *It's been a while since you've been heard from, Steve — what have you been up to?*

STEVE ENGLEHART: I've been up to a lot. Two years ago, I went to work for Atari, doing game development — and also advertising, for a while. The well-known underground artist in San Francisco, **Ted Richards**, who does DOPIN' DAN, had a job with Atari, so I called to ask a question about computers for a novel I was writing and he said, "Why don't you come to work for us?" They made me an offer I couldn't refuse.

DAK: *That was in the days when Atari was the savior of the field?*

STEVE: Absolutely. It was God. It was Number One. It was at Atari's peak — they were hiring people, giving extremely good salaries, giving free computers if you worked there for a year. Ted said computers *are* the wave of the future, so you might as well learn now and get paid for it. As it turned out, I'm a big computer fan. I really like them. At the time, I didn't know that, but I took the job because it was an adventure, it was something different to do, and the circumstances were good. So I put the novel on hold and went to work for Atari.

DAK: *Wasn't that about the time Starlin asked you about doing an Epic comic? Did you ever think you'd work for Marvel again?*

STEVE: I never thought I would — but as he said, it's not the same Marvel. The people I didn't like aren't there any more,

The early, Marshall Rogers version of Coyote, from ECLIPSE #6.

they pay you to fly to conventions, it's just — pretty much they were giving what **Starlin** and I and a lot of people said they oughta give us and which they said would never happen. All of a sudden, it was happening. So I took on the COYOTE job, I took on the Atari job, and that's what I've been up to for the past two years. I also became a father during that time, so my life has been full.

DAK: *Tell us about your Atari odyssey.*

STEVE: Six months after I went to work for Atari, it underwent the first of its reorganizations — and ever since then, they've been reorganizing downward. I had this perverse pleasure at being there. It was like riding whitewater. Things would get worse and worse. They would throw out people by the hundreds — and I'd still be there! This group I was with, the Advanced Games Group, stayed there right up until Warner dumped Atari. The guy who bought the company is keeping the name and the distribution system, but he threw the rest of us out on the street. They had to sell the company to get rid of us; but eventually they did.

DAK: *What were you, a novice, doing at Atari, anyway?*

STEVE: The guy I was working for, **Chris Horseman**, had been a boy wonder in England. He had a software company, and Atari hired him to come over. Atari had built its reputation on proven arcade games such as Pac Man, Centipede, and so on. So they thought that all they had to do was sit there and be Atari and they'd make millions forever. But everyone else in Silicon Valley went out and developed better games. And it took a while, but eventually the market said, "Ah! These are better games! So we won't buy Atari!" That's what the trouble was, so **Horseman's** mandate was to put together a specific group of people — like MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE or whatever — and design some original games. Most videogame designers are programmers. I was hired with the idea — which I think was quite sound, and I'll tell you why in a minute — of getting someone who wasn't a programmer, to get a different perspective on it. Also, to backstop the programmers. They could bounce ideas off me. I could take their different ideas, actually put them together in a coherent scenario, write up the manuals to run with the games, and so forth. It was a good idea. Videogames take usually about a year from inception to completion. The group was together about a year. And then they threw us all out into the street. I had one game that was very close to completion, two more that were in stages of development. They were text adventures. Those games are probably dead now. With the change in ownership, and the change in emphasis, all that stuff is down the tubes.

DAK: *Were they arcade games?*

STEVE: No, these were for home computers. Our group was working on both home-computer and arcade games. I was also working on a GARFIELD arcade game. I was working on a LAST STAR-FIGHTER arcade game —

DAK: *Steve Englehart, writing GARFIELD for home video?*

STEVE: Actually, I can't apologize for it, because it was fun on the face of it, and I have come to the conclusion that what I really want out of life is to enjoy it. I spent four years writing a novel and didn't get paid for it until the fourth year — so I've been rich and I've been poor, and rich is better. You need money to live a life that you want to — there's only so long that you can say, "We can't go to the movies this weekend, or we can't go out to eat." So, basically, my lifestyle has evolved to

© 1982 Steve Englehart and Marshall Rogers

literature, but you get your pleasures where you can."

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a rather eclectic hedonism, I guess. I want to enjoy myself and have the ability to do that. Working on an arcade videogame is just another experience, in the same ballpark as doing films or records — it's an aspect of media with its own rules and regulations, and trade-offs and personalities and so forth. It's just fun to be a part of it, the same way it was to be part of the Marvel Bullpen. They were all good people, and **Jim Davis** is a nice guy, and we had fun. That GARFIELD game may still happen. The arcade end of Atari remains a Warner's company — *for now* — as the papers put it at the time. The first time I saw stuff that I wrote right there in full, glorious color on a television screen, it was a thrill. What I wrote is Garfield running through a supermarket picking up lasagna. We're not talking about great literature, but there it was, this bright orange cat doing what I told it to. You get your pleasures where you can.

DAK: *It looks like you'll be getting them from comics again . . .*

STEVE: Yeah. I went to the San Diego Con a few weeks ago — it was the first time I'd seen most of the comics people from New York, in a long time. A lot of them offered me work, and I said, "Sorry, my time is all taken care of." I flew back and found out my time at Atari was finally up. So at the next con I attended, in Chicago, I went up to all those comics people and said, "Hi! Remember me? I'd like some work!" *(Laughter.)*

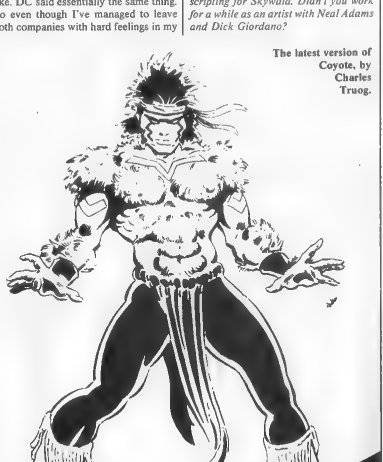
DAK: *What comics projects will you be writing — and for whom?*

STEVE: I want to work for Marvel, because they're publishing COYOTE and the relationship has been very amicable this time. I've been treated fairly. They stuck by COYOTE when it was going through some terrible problems. We're talking about doing — and this is not yet nailed down, but I think it's going to be — a twelve-part SILVER SURFER maxi-series. They've got to check with **Stan Lee**. Basically, Marvel said there are no series sitting around without a writer, so there's no regular series we can give you at the moment — but do as many maxi-series and/or graphic albums as you'd like. DC said essentially the same thing. So even though I've managed to leave both companies with hard feelings in my time, I seem to have been welcomed back.

Dick Giordano is probably my oldest friend in comics.

DAK: *I remember seeing some of your art in print around 1972, when I was scripting for Skywald. Didn't you work for a while as an artist with Neal Adams and Dick Giordano?*

The latest version of Coyote, by Charles Truog.



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AND COTH IS MAGNIFICENT! ONE AFTER ANOTHER THE WEARERS OF THE WHITE EMBLEM FALL BENEATH HIS AWFUL STROKES. BUT PRINCE VALIANT NOTES THAT MOST OF HIS VICTIMS ARE STRUCK FROM BEHIND WHILE FACING ANOTHER OPPONENT!
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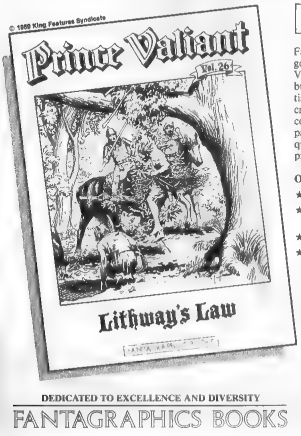

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"Coyote is no more me than my very intense Batman or my liberal Captain America."

STEVE: Well, not with Neal *and* Dick. I first met Dick when he was an editor at Charlton, and he sort of encouraged me. He was a very good art critic, because he never told me my work was good — which it wasn't — he just encouraged me to keep trying. Later, I connected with Neal, before he and Dick put together the Continuity Associates studio. I never worked with them together, I was either with one or the other. Because it's no secret that I wanted to be an artist but couldn't do it. But trying to think as an artist for all those years was good training to write for comics. I can visualize the pages.

DAK: *You just didn't have it in you to be an artist, Steve — or do you think it's something you could have learned, had you stuck with it?*

STEVE: No. God, I had who I considered the best teacher in the world — **Neal Adams** — teaching me to draw, and he taught me a lot. I remember him saying, "Where the hell does that shoulder connect to the back?" He taught me a lot about how the human body works, how lighting falls on the body, and where the muscles are — but it was the kind of thing I understood yet just didn't really have the facility to do. I think that if I had spent another ten years at it, I probably could have gotten to the point where I would be a nice, third-rate artist. I would have had to work a long time just to get there. And whether I would have or not is hard to say, because a scripting job fell into my lap and I said, "Gee, I really like this." And **Roy Thomas** said, "I really like it, too. Want to do some more?" And all of a sudden I was writing all the time, and I just didn't pursue art. I would have known all the things **Neal Adams** knows — maybe — but I would have never been another **Neal Adams**.

Anyway, for DC, Dick wants to do a weekly comic that's sort of a cross between PILOTE and MARVEL AGE. It's gonna have DC hype, but they're also gonna have a number of continuing series on a weekly basis.

DAK: *That's interesting. Stan Lee talked about publishing something like that a number of years ago.*

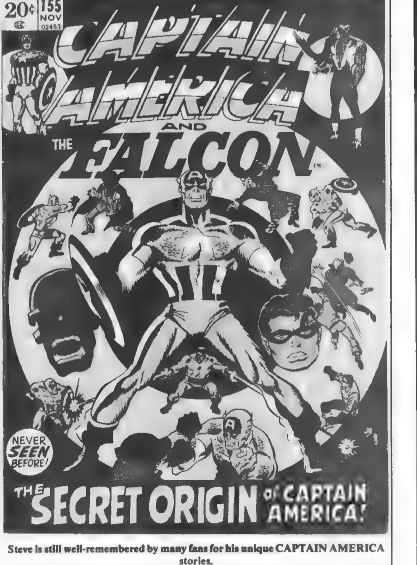
STEVE: I never knew that.

DAK: *That was one of the many things we kicked around.*

STEVE: Well, there's still a possibility that market research may indicate this is not a viable idea. But the concept is 32 pages for 50¢, weekly, with about half a dozen continued strips — some of them as short as two pages, none of them longer than four. One of the four-pagers would be one I've agreed to do, BLUE BEETLE. I like weird stuff that's really offbeat. I think four pages a week is a challenge, just as much as GARFIELD or anything else. Nobody's done that kind of thing. And there is *another* project that Dick and I are talking about real seriously, that I'm not at liberty to divulge.

DAK: *Alas!*

STEVE: Do you publish the parts where I say, "I can't tell you this"" on the tape?



Steve is still well-remembered by many fans for his unique CAPTAIN AMERICA stories.

DAK: *Only if it reads well.*

STEVE: Okay. Anyway, there's also a new company that's got the rights to the T.H.U.N.D.E.R. Agents. **Dave Singer** has got the rights, and he wants to do *48* pages for two bucks, on Baxter paper — 20 pages of me and **Dave Cockrum** up front doing the T.H.U.N.D.E.R. agents, 20 pages of **Dann Thomas** and **George Perez** doing RAVEN in the middle, and somebody doing LIGHTNING in the back. And then a second book with DYNAMO. It's either going to be great or it'll die a terrible death. Having done a

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"COYOTE was designed to rival X-MEN."

AY CARAMBA-- AS THE CONQUISTADORES WOULD SAY!
THIS IS NOT THE TALLY I'VE KNOWN!
BUT IT'S THE TALLY I ALWAYS SHOULD HAVE BEEN!
YOU MAY HAVE LIKED CASSIE BETTER AT FIRST, BUT DON'T FORGET THAT WE'RE SISTERS!

© 1984 Steve Englehart, Art © 1984 Charles Troog and Rich Howell.

The animalistic Coyote has an affair with two sisters. Below: current events intrude upon the bedroom. Troug and Howell art illustrates Englehart writing in COYOTE #10.

number of really serious things over a period of time — DOCTOR STRANGE, BATMAN — the T.H.U.N.D.E.R. Agents has gotta be kind of light. It's my group book and it's gonna be offbeat.

DAK: *I heard you might also be scripting some other series at Marvel.*

STEVE: Well, the problem I'm having is that I did most everybody the first time around. I even did the Surfer for a few issues of THE DEFENDERS, although I never did him as his own character. There aren't that many characters floating around that I haven't already done —

DAK: *Wasn't there a BLACK WIDOW series under discussion?*

STEVE: For a long time, I've wanted to do a serious Russian sequence. It fascinates me. What kind of person wants to be a secret policeman, inside a society that encourages it, that pays well? You get good benefits, you get to oppress your fellow citizens, as a way of life. I want to investigate Russia as it exists, and my Epic Comics series, COYOTE, by being set in its own universe, is a place where I can do that.

When I sat down with THE BLACK WIDOW I re-read everything that had been done with her, and found out to my surprise that she dates back to, like, TALES OF SUSPENSE #53 — she's been around for twenty years! You don't think of the Black Widow as one of Marvel's first characters, but she was. She was always a secondary character and whenever they gave her her own series, it didn't seem to go anywhere — she didn't have much motivation. I've noticed, in thinking about Russian dissidents in COYOTE, that there's this real love of the Motherland. If you're **Andrei Sakharov** or **Solzenitsyn**, you'd rather stay in the Soviet Union and get harrassed than be unable to get back to Russia. So I thought that the Black Widow should be feeling, "This whole thing is meaningless. I came to America, and my love relationship has fallen through, Ivan's not around — I want to go back to Russia. I gotta go back to Russia." But the more I thought about it, the more I realized I would have ended up doing Russian stories in both COYOTE and THE BLACK WIDOW — and I don't *have* two sets of Russian stories. If I have to choose, I want to do it in my book, the one that I own.

AND SO, HE TOLD HER ABOUT VENUS--
-- AND IT'S KINDA LIKE THE AMERICANS IN VIET NAM, OR THE RUSSIANS IN AFGHANISTAN!
THE SUPER-POWER BEHIND THE LOCAL WAR!
HUH! I KNOW THE RUSSIANS SEND MOST OF THEIR SPACE PROBES TO VENUS!
BEFORE WE CUT BACK OUR PROBES, WE MOSTLY SCOUTED MARS, BUT THEY'VE ALWAYS PREFERRED THE INNER PLANET!
NOW WE KNOW WHY!

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"THE T.H.U.N.D.E.R. AGENTS is my

COYOTE cover art by Truog and Howell.

DAK: *That brings up an interesting point. It seems that all these series you're scripting will be owned by other people, rather than by you.*

STEVE: Well, if there were a lot of Epic Comics deals floating around, I would do nothing else, but they're not taking on any more projects. Eclipse basically said, "If you come up with something, we'll give you an Eclipse deal," which is a good deal. But Eclipse and I had a love/hate relationship going for a long time, for their inability to get the stuff that I wrote on the stands. **Cat Yronwode** and I get along fine, so it's a possibility — but my priorities are Marvel, because it's Marvel; THE BLUE BEETLE, because it's **Dick Giordano;** and the T.H.U.N.D.E.R. Agents,because it's an old favorite.

Of course I prefer to own my own characters. I feel I'm really developing an **Englehart**-strip world by now, because I've accumulated characters from these various independent companies — I've got the Djinn and Coyote and Scorpio Rose and all wandering around. On the other hand, since I'm dropping back into comics wholesale after a time away, I guess I'm trying to capture a sense of a more innocent time of my life. I'd rather do the Silver Surfer for a while than create a new character for Eclipse. I don't think that'll go on forever.

DAK: *Is it because you think it's necessary to reintroduce yourself to the comics audience?*

STEVE: Oh, sure. Less so now, because of COYOTE. I wrote an editorial in the first issue of COYOTE that said, "Most of you probably never heard of me." And I found out that was true — most people didn't have the slightest idea of who I am. And COYOTE, although doing respectably, isn't challenging the X-MEN by all reports. I have never suffered from a lack of ego, but at the same time I've always tried to be rational about this — you know, really, I never expected that everyone would just fall down dead that I had come back again. I have a horror of wandering around at comics conventions twenty years from now, saying, "I used to write THE AVENGERS. I was famous once." It's like — if I can't write stuff in 1984 or 1985, and have people say, "Gosh, I like that," then I'm not succeeding on my own terms. I started from scratch once, and I'm starting from scratch again, in the sense that most people out there couldn't care less who **Steve Englehart** is. It's up to me to make them care. So **Carol Kalish** suggested that if I were to do a series for Marvel — something like the SILVER SURFER — then I can also say in the back of the book, "Hey, folks, I also do COYOTE!"

DAK: *How would you describe COYOTE in 250 words or more?*

STEVE: Well, COYOTE is an amalgam of several different personalities. We're not talking Moon Knight here — he's not nuts — but he is basically an American Indian (Paiute to be specific) who, at the age of two, had a second personality shoved into his consciousness by the Coyote God, who is the trickster-god of a number of American Indian tribes. This trickster is pretty much common to all mythologies — Loki, I often say, is the version in the Norse mythology, although this guy is not as evil. The Indians were people who lived in harmony with the land, season after season, and when guys showed up in armor and on horseback, they just didn't know what to do. Then came the settlers and so forth, and we all know the end of that story. So the Coyote God said, "I failed. I didn't know what to do, how to save my people from being over-run," and put all his godly powers into trying to understand these Europeans

© 1984 Steve Englehart Art © 1984 Charles Truog and Rich Howell

group book and it's gonna be off-beat."

who had come and over-run his land. And when he had that understanding, which took until seventeen or nineteen years ago, he implanted it in this two-year-old Indian baby who happened to be in his sphere of influence at that time. The theory being this guy would grow up as a person — as opposed to a Coyote God — and would be able to deal with this European power structure. There are alternate realities — and ghosts, vampires and were-creatures occupy this kind of hazy land between dimensions — they can live in this one, but they're kind of connected to the other one, the more mystical one. The kid is not a were-creature, but being raised by one he gained insight and access to these alternate dimensions. So by the age of nineteen, he's a healthy young guy, but he's sort of a primal character — which is why we have sex and bad language and all this kind of stuff, because he doesn't know the social niceties. He thinks of himself as Coyote –

THE SILVER SURFER
THIS IS DYNAMO II HE OWES HIS INCREDIBLE STRENGTH TO THE ATOMIC POWER OF THE THUNDERBELT!
HE IS IN REALITY LEONARD BROWN AGENT OF T.H.U.N.D.E.R.
HIS SPECIALLY DESIGNED SUIT IS MADE OF A METALLIC FABRIC TO PROTECT HIM WHEN THE BELT IS OFF!
THUNDER AGENTS
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MEGATON MAN JOINS KITCHEN SINK LINE-UP!

"I don't feel that I'm regressing."

not the animal, but the spirit — who knows how to shape-change. His only power — other than the ability to run fast — is to sort of change his image. It's not just that he can look like other people, he can also cause other people to appear differently, too. He can sort of change the reality around him. He's probably a mutant.

DAK: *Okay, that's who Coyote is — but what does he do?*

STEVE: I took this character — primal, shape-changing, savage, unsocial, unutored, living in the desert his whole life, and shoved him into Las Vegas, probably the most worldly city — anything you want is available in Las Vegas, from sex, drugs, rock-and-roll to gambling, plus a lot of right-wing corporations. Coyote's learned that being unsocial pretty much equates to being anti-social, and if you want to have any friends, you have to modify that. He's kind of like the original Tarzan — although Tarzan, by the time he got to England, could speak French and all that kind of stuff. Beyond that, COYOTE is very much a continuing story. It's not like THE FANTASTIC FOUR, where there are four people with super powers and every month they'll meet a super-villain and every couple of years Sue will have a baby or Johnny Storm will get a new girl. We have a situation which can do more than gradually change with time. The story changes issue by issue. My original goal, still fairly intact, is never to get to the point where you could say, "Here's Coyote in ten words or less," and here's the new super-villain this month. That has led to problems. Trying to do something that is for comic-book readers but isn't *like* most comics has taught me a lot of things — one of which is that people read comics because they expect to find a certain thing there. Over time, I have definitely modified my concept without giving up on my basic goal. You know, we've got a super-villain — within this reality, my Shadow Cabinet can sort of provide people like that — but it's not the Marvel Universe. COYOTE was designed not to be there. It was also designed to rival the X-MEN in sales. Since it hasn't done the second, we've been playing with it. And, you know, in low moments I thought well, maybe I should give him five superheroes to run around with and a green dog —

DAK: (Laughter.) *I would think that would be the temptation. Especially the green dog!*

STEVE: COYOTE is my shot — my first shot, hopefully not my last — to do *what* I want to do, the *way* I want to do it. If in the end it wasn't a viable thing and it came to pass COYOTE died, I would rather have 25 or 50 or however many issues there would be, and be able to say, "This was mine. This was what I wanted to do." It's not the SILVER SURFER. I can do the Silver Surfer, too, and I don't mind doing the Silver Surfer. But Coyote's gotta be Coyote. It's designed to be different. When I was famous, I could do really off-

"I wrote the issue of CAPTAIN AMERICA without Captain America." In CAPTAIN AMERICA #180, Cap temporarily became The Nomad. Art by Sal Buscema and Vince Colletta.

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"Coyote's kind of like the original Tarzan."

the-wall stuff and everybody said, "Isn't this amazing — he can do off-the-wall stuff!" Now, when nobody knows who I am, and I do off-the-wall stuff, people say, "Huh?" Well that's just the way it is. And I got nothing else to say.

DAK: *What are the underlying themes?*

STEVE: Power — international power, in any of its aspects. The whole international scene has never really been done in comics. COYOTE was the first thing I created after my novel, THE POINT MAN, and I was still operating out of that headspace. I wanted to do international intrigue. That realm of power — people who have control over other people in this reality — is what I wanted to get at. And I thought that, simple law of dynamics, the best way to do that was to come up with this guy at the other end of the spectrum — a primal, untutored, unrounded individual — who would come into Vegas and run smack into this thing and be the polar opposite.

DAK: *Do you have an outcome in mind?*

STEVE: As far as I'm concerned, I'll do COYOTE forever — if I can. And it's not like over the course of a year, a year's worth of stuff will have happened, or close to it. It's only been about three weeks, total, from issue #1 to #11, in real time. Therefore, since I'm sort of operating in a lot of different directions at once, the forward momentum of Coyote's life has not gone that far, although he's gone from being totally outside the organization to the third chamber, which is the inner circle of the Shadow Cabinet. What I intend for him to do is to work his way up from the inside, to work his way all the way to the top, and as he gets further into it, deeper levels of the conspiracy are opened to him and more and more things come out of that.

DAK: *Do you think he'll ever be co-opted by it? Do you think he'll ever become a part of it?*

STEVE: The first time that was suggested to me it came as a revelation. It is certainly within the realm of possibility — Coyote loves a good joke, he loves a trick, and I think that he could get far enough into it that he could think, "This is the biggest trick of all." You know, to be running the world, unseen by everybody. That's further down the line, so I don't know.

DAK: *Setting the series in Vegas certainly seems appropriate to the theme, by virtue of the intense contrasts between the man-made city of pleasure and its stark natural surrounding. Was that deliberate?*

STEVE: I ended up going to Las Vegas in 1973, the summer, spending a month with

Coyote goes to Las Vegas, where he meets a lovely agent of the mysterious Shadow Cabinet and makes a political statement in the shower. Englehart dialogue, Rogers art. From ECLIPSE #4.

Al Weiss. We roamed the desert a lot. I saw Las Vegas not as a gleaming fantasy-land of casinos and entertainment, but a desert, with a town in the middle of it that lit up at night. Vegas is a hooker. The whole point of Vegas is to provide pleasure for the visitor. Anything you want — you can get. That fascinated me. But mostly what I was interested in that summer was the desert. I became very fasinated by it, with the fact that it doesn't have humidity or any sort of thing to wear it away. It's all sort of lying there right where it fell when the last earthquake went off or the last eruption or whatever. Huge boulders lying scattered on top of each other, and these plants that sit there months and months without any water and it rains once and they suck it all up, and then they sit there for months and months. The whole spirit of the place really intrigued me. It became a spot that was unique on Earth to me — the combination of that whole primal desert and the gaming.

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© 1981 Steve Englehart and Marshall Rogers

Morningstar has temperatures rising each month in the

Elementals

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"I'm fairly conversant with mysticism, but I don't dress up in robes and slaughter small dogs."

© 1982 Steve Englehart and Marshall Rogers

"Coyote is primal, savage, unsocial — kind of like the original Tarzan." Rogers art from ECLIPSE #6.

DAK: *Are you religious?*

STEVE: I am, I would say, a pagan, in the sense that I don't think things just happened. There is an overriding consciousness to the world. But I find it hard to believe in the Judeo-Christian God, *per se.* I feel much more spiritually satisfied hiking through woods — nature gives me a feeling of coherence, of consciousness, whatever. That's my personal belief. Neither, I hasten to add, do I have any prejudices against anyone who believes in any other way. Among the first things I did in COYOTE was to trash fundamentalistic Christians, fanatic Israelis, and even more fanatic Arabs — but it was never intended to be anti-religious.

DAK: *Judging from your comics work, mysticism seems to have struck a chord in you.*

STEVE: I'm interested in reality — but I conceive of reality as being very large. My reality doesn't stop where other people's reality does. I read about magic and I sorta became convinced. There are people claiming to have conjured a demon or seen a UFO and either they're all lying or crazy — or there's something interesting going on. I've done a lot of reading and research and I have not conjured a demon, but I think I've seen a UFO, I believe I've seen a gnome. Put that in your interview and smoke it. If people reading this say, "That's a lot of hogwash" and "the guy must be on drugs," then you know, what can I tell you? So in answer to your question, I would say I'm fairly conversant with a lot of mystical philosophy at this point, but I don't dress up in robes and slaughter small dogs.

COYOTE #1 was illustrated by another member of "the Legion of Steves" — Leialoha. (See COMICS INTERVIEW #10 for his hilarious interview and his reason for leaving COYOTE!)

COYOTE © 1983 Steve Englehart, Art © 1983 Steve Leialoha

DAK: *Too bad.* (Laughter.) *Well, tell us about your experiences.*

STEVE: Well, we were camped in the Sierras one night, and I was looking up, and saw a light going overhead at a fairly fast speed. If it was a plane, it would have had to have been low enough that I would have heard it. If it had been something way up in the sky, like a satellite or a jet, it wouldn't have been crossing the skies that fast. Whatever it was, it was moving at a pretty good clip, and it suddenly made — *chunk!* — a right turn. Now, that has been described as something that UFOs do, and nobody has come up with a better explanation for something that can be moving that fast and make that kind of sharp 90 degree turn. Was it a UFO? I don't know, I can't prove it.

When we were in Europe, up in northern Norway, we were camped beside Lake Totak. THE POINT MAN, my novel, includes elementals, and in preparation for writing that book, I was reading about elementals. Suddenly, I just had this feeling — which is what you operate out of a lot in magic, which is why it's not scientific — that if I got out of the van, I could see an elemental. It was a moonlit night, but it was basically reasonably dark. I stood by this waterfall, and this little creature, about a foot tall, came

"I think I've seen a UFO and a gnome."

down the rocks and stood about three feet away from me, and seemed to throw it's head back and look at me. And I looked at it. I could see a size and shape and that was about all. And I thought, "Is this a gnome? I'd sure like to see it better, but if I go back in the van and get a flashlight, it won't be here anymore," so I kind of looked at it and it kind of looked at me, and then it went away. It could have been a chipmunk, I suppose. I felt at the time it was a little elemental creature, but who knows? I can't prove it.

DAK: *You said Coyote is primal — how much of you is in that character?*

STEVE: Coyote is no more me than my very intense Batman, or my liberal Captain America, or my Scarlet Witch. You know, in the later years of my first Marvel career, people would say, "This is **Englehart's** Captain America," or whatever, but I always thought if you took over a character, it shouldn't suddenly take a 90 degree right turn. If you wanted to go somewhere else, that was probably worth a story or two as to how the character changed his position. **Jack Kirby**, I know, at one point, in the various small brush fires that have come up, said, "Well, *my* Captain America would never have quit because he was disillusioned with the government and so forth." Hard to say. I felt that the character, as I understood him, would have felt that way in that situation. You just sort of throw the characters in a box and they start going at it. **Stan Lee** once said that all these characters write themselves, and I've found that to be true.

Cover pencils for WALLY WOOD'S T.H.U.N.D.E.R. AGENTS # 1, by Deluxe Comics Artist George Perez.

Illustration © 1984 Deluxe Comics

Put that in your interview and smoke it."

One of the things that turns me on is a feeling that I did a character right. If they all sounded like me, I would have a pretty limited career. By drawing on some of the things I learned about life in Las Vegas and life in the desert, I've incorporated some of my overall life into Coyote — but he's not me. I don't sit down with an overriding philosophy other than to come up with a good story.

DAK: *How have you maintained your interest in writing superhero comics?*

STEVE: It's a part of me. It's just a part of me. I've loved comics for years and years. I loved doing them, but as I ran into more and more bureaucracy, I found that I didn't love *that* very much. I became a radical. I wanted things they weren't going to give. I got out of it, and I went off to do other things. And I found that I liked novels and I liked computers — but the kid that liked comics is still inside me. When I first started working for Marvel, that's all I did. I was writing six books a month in those days. I would work until four or five in the morning, sleep until noon, get up, eat something, work until dinner, work during dinner, work until four in the morning, fall asleep, then get up and do it over again. I loved it. Now that I've been exposed to other things that I like to do, I don't live comics 24 hours a day, the way I used to. On the other hand, I've never really lost that interest in comics.

So I guess COYOTE is the truest expression of where I am these days. I want to do a comic that incorporates an approach that isn't just Marvel. Having done COYOTE in that manner, these other projects are like letting the kid out. Let's do a really neat Silver Surfer, but on the Silver Surfer's terms. You know, I was not displeased to have people say, "This was the best BATMAN ever done." Or, "This was the best CAPTAIN AMERICA." Or, "This was *the* DOCTOR STRANGE." I'd like people to say, "This is *the* SILVER SURFER." And they're only going to say that if I give them the Silver Surfer on his own terms. I can do that. That's fun. I don't feel that I'm slumming, or that I'm regressing.

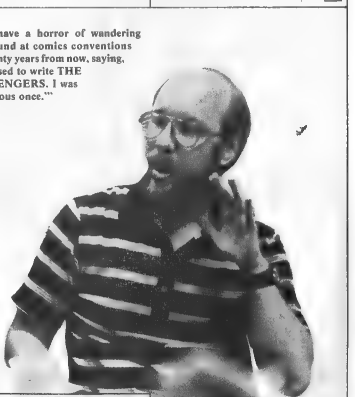
DAK: *As you said earlier, when people read comics they expect a certain something, a certain formula. Does that bother you?*

STEVE: You have more ability to say what you want in comics than in almost any other medium. In novels, you can say *exactly* what you want — but you can also take years in doing them, so you don't get the satisfaction all that often. I have chosen not to write for television. I considered, eleven years ago, when I first moved to Southern California, going that route. And various other people in comics have gone that route. But, it seems to me that in television you'd be writing to a formula and you'd also have thirty-seven vice-presidents in charge of rewriting it. So, in the end, you'd wind up apologizing for it all the time. The nice thing is that most people in the world don't think too highly of comics, yet whether they do or not, at least I never feel that I have to apologize for what I did. I'm tailoring COYOTE more to what the people want to see — but that's not slumming, either, because what people want to see is a legitimate thing to want to see. And comics is, you know, a fight in the beginning, a fight in the middle if you're lucky, some problem with the girlfriend, and a fight at the end. If you do that regularly enough, then you can do issues where you don't have any of that. You know, I did that issue of CAPTAIN AMERICA where he just stood around and everybody kept coming up and offering advice. And I've done, you know, the Batman story that had no Batman in it — the Captain America story with no Captain America in it. Once you establish a formula, you can break it. But the formula is still valid. You're breaking the formula — but not creating a new one. An entire series of CAPTAIN AMERICA without Captain America isn't going to fly. That's why I'm really looking forward to doing this comic-book stuff. I haven't done it in a long time. I was famous once, I wouldn't mind being famous again.

The philosophy of a Coyote. Englehart words, Truog and Howell art from COYOTE #9.

© 1984 Steve Englehart, Art © 1984 Charles Truog and Rich Howell

"I have a horror of wandering around at comics conventions twenty years from now, saying, 'I used to write THE AVENGERS. I was famous once.'"



© Photo: Mike Gaitron

"Creators are stars. I made MAGE's creator

VITAL STATISTICS

Name: Matthew Brown Wagner
Occupation: Storyteller
Birth: 9 October 1961 — Lewiston, Pennsylvania
Training: Two years as an Art major at James Madison University, then two-and-a-half years at the Philadelphia College of Arts.
Credits: MAGE, GRENDEL
Favorite Comics: THE SPIRIT, THE SHADOW, BATMAN, the original CAPTAIN MARVEL
Favorite Artists: Frank Miller, Will Eisner, Mac Raboy
Favorite Movies: No one film in particular, but I'm a big fan of German Expressionist films from the Silent Era.
Favorite Books: Sir Thomas Malory's LE MORTE D'ARTHUR. It's the most essential tale of everything you would want to know about heroism in Western culture.

When we first heard of Matt Wagner, he was described by a colleague at Comico as "the next Frank Miller." (See COMICS INTERVIEW #5, for our First Look at the then-fledgling comic company.) Since then, Matt's GRENDEL — a six-issue series about an eerily attractive assassin — has gained something of a cult following, and his second limited-run epic, MAGE, not only launched Comico's line of color books, but brought Wagner's unique style to the attention of an even wider audience. We wanted to learn more about this interesting young writer/artist — called "Mr. Different" by the Comico crew — and in the following conversion, Matt shares his views on his creations, heroes (his own and others), villains, and how he's gone one step beyond John Byrne in comics' new star system . . .

BILL CHADWICK: *How did you get the idea for MAGE?*

MATT WAGNER: Often just one little word will be the foundation of an idea, and you start building on it. I just liked the word, "mage," and started building a sorcerous character from there. I did a few sketches of this wild, semi-punkish-looking guy. The Mage is toned down now, somewhat, in his appearance. Originally, he was a little more extravagant. And then I decided I wanted him to be the title character, but not the main character. And as it turned out, this main character, Kevin, is modeled after me, physically

BILL: *Why?*

MATT: For several reasons. One, I'm a real cheap model. *(Laughter.)* And I have an easy visual reference in myself. I am also the negative counterpart of what the Mage looks like. I'm built big and solid and a lot more down-to-earth looking than the Mage, who's little and whimsical-looking. You see, I had started to see things happening in comics that are very reminiscent of Hollywood during the Thirties and Forties. The comics industry is becoming Hollywood — that big a business. We're getting many stars in the comics. There are trade journals in comics reminiscent of the movie publications that were very popular during the Thirties. And they're both escapist entertainments, for the most part. The big difference is that in comics you have no actors. You have the characters, but you have no flesh-and-blood counterparts to these characters. Therefore,

and main character the same person."

MATT WAGNER

in comics, the creators are becoming the big stars. I've noticed that the creators pop up in comics nowadays — sometimes more often than the characters themselves. It seems like **John Byrne** draws himself into every other issue of the FANTASTIC FOUR. And I wanted to take that one step farther and make the creator and the main character the same person.

BILL: *And that person is Matt Wagner.*

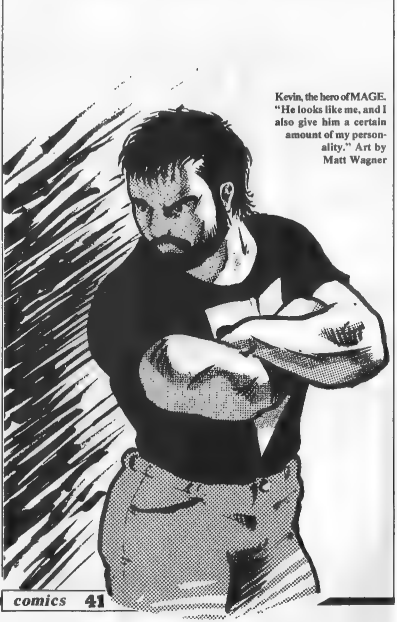
MATT: It's not totally biographical. Visually, Kevin looks like me, and *some* parts of his philosophy are like mine. He talks an awful lot like I do, and his mannerisms are an awful lot like mine. He even dresses like I do. I also give him a certain amount of my personality, asking myself, "How would I react if all of a sudden I was being thrust into this kind of situation?" — if all of a sudden somebody was doing things around me — and *I* was doing things — that weren't supposed to happen, according to rational thinking, and if this Mage were telling me that *I'm* the hero and that *I'm* destined for greater things. And so you can have an objective and subjective view of Kevin at the same time.

BILL: *How would you say Kevin differs from you?*

MATT: At the very beginning of the first issue, Kevin sits down next to the Mage and starts to tell him how alone he feels and how he's not really that fond of his friends and parents and the lovers that he's had. I'm not as cynical on life as Kevin is. I mainly thought that cynicism would work well with the character. I don't go into Kevin's background because basically it's not important. What's important is that he isn't what he thought he was.

BILL: *What is he?*

MATT: Kevin is the essence of the Eternal Hero, which is not an entirely new concept. Quite a few people have worked on it, probably most notably **Michael Moorcock**, in his Eternal Champion series. I'm working on the idea that throughout history, there's always been one hero — the same essence popping up in different people, in different eras. The Hero is like one heart borrowed by different people throughout eternity, and it's that heart that pushes the Hero on and on. Our ad campaign is, "Practically everything Kevin Matchstick has ever believed about himself is a lie." That's also one of the reasons he wears the Captain Marvel T-shirt with the lightning bolt on it. Kevin says that he wishes he could be like Captain Marvel, because Captain Marvel is



Kevin, the hero of MAGE. "He looks like me, and I also give him a certain amount of my personality." Art by Matt Wagner

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"I go along with the Frank Miller and Will Eisner philosophy of storytelling."

Cover of MAGE #4.

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a child with adult responsibilities, and simply by saying the magic word, "Shazam" — poof! — he takes care of these responsibilites by shirking them off on somebody else — Captain Marvel. Kevin wishes he could be like that, but knows that he can't. And that's why the lightning bolt isn't in the extravagant red and gold colors. It's in stark black and white.

BILL: *Who — or what — is the Mage?*

MATT: Hmm . . . *(Laughter.)*

BILL: *I gather we're skirting around Secret Territory.*

MATT: There's a surprise ending I don't want to give away. Let me put it this way: All through history, the hero is often so involved in his actions he can't take an objective view of what's happening. So he's had a companion, a teacher — somebody who points the hero in the right direction. That's the function that the Mage performs here. I've always liked magician characters, and I love the DR. STRANGE books, and I love mysterious characters. So I'm going to keep the Mage mysterious. I'm never going to get specific about what the Mage can do. When I read in the MARVEL UNIVERSE books exactly what Dr. Strange's powers were, that blew it all for me. "Oh . . . this is kind of depressing — this is what he can do! *Groan!*" *(Laughter.)*

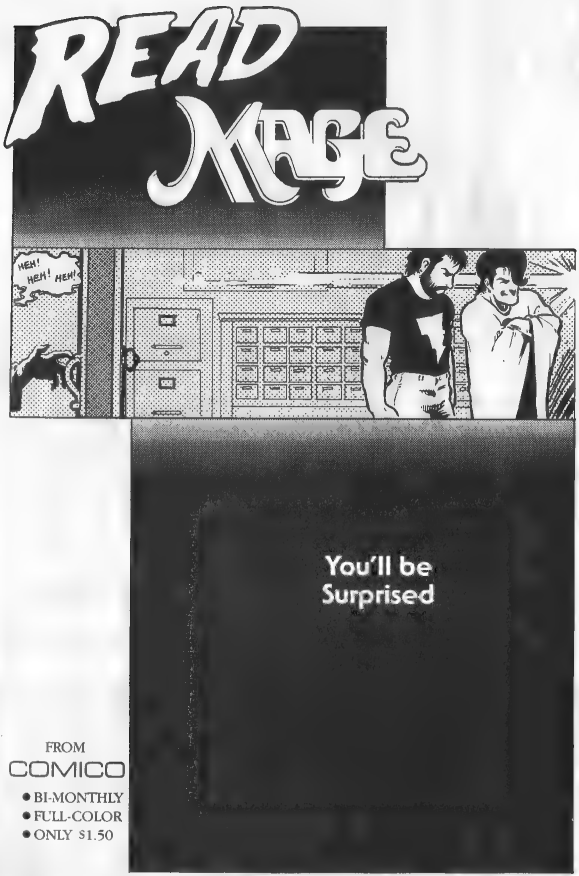
The Mage

BILL: *Because it gives you an idea of what he can't do?*

MATT: Yeah, exactly. You should never know everything about a magician. Magicians aren't on the same level as immortal men.

BILL: *You said you based Kevin's look on yourself. On the MAGE poster that Comico put out, the Mage looks to me like Stan Laurel.* (Laughter.)

MATT: The **Stan Laurel** look on the poster comes basically from the smile on his face. I wanted him to be thin and wispy with a kind of maniacal glint. These wizard characters know so much they seem like fools. And the fool label comes basically from man's misconception of the wizards. Originally I wanted him to look a little more violent, with a sharper, crisper look. I had him in a smaller poncho and he carried a couple of daggers. His eyebrows were more highly arched. The hair was wilder and a little more spiked. Eventually I toned that down because I didn't think it fit him perfectly. I always had the leg wrappings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"I want to get across in GRENDEL that good and evil are sometimes indistinguishable."

that went all the way up his legs because it gave him a certain ragged appeal which I think magicians should have. That's one complaint I've always had about Dr. Strange. He looks a bit too slick. If he's so concerned with metaphysics, he shouldn't look that good physically.

BILL: *What led you to do comics?*

MATT: One day I got on the elevator at the Philadelphia College of Art, and there was a guy standing there who had a Creation Convention T-shirt on, and we struck up a conversation. The guy was **Bill Cucinotta**, now with Comico. I learned that with a couple of his friends he published an underground newspaper at the college called DUCK WORK, which was all duck-oriented cartoons — MY THREE DUCKS, SPACE DUCK, PUNK DUCK, stuff like that . So I went up and talked to them, and then I started submitting things to them, doing full-page movie take-offs, such as RAIDERS OF THE LOST DUCK and ROLLER DUCK. Eventually these guys dropped out of school and formed Comico. After they dropped out, I kind of lost contact with them for about half a year, and they called me and said, "We liked your work and we want you to work on something for us for the COMICO PRIMER." That's when I had started developing a story based on the Arthurian legends — and then DC put out CAMELOT 3000. That shot my balloon down. So then I came up with the story of GRENDEL, and they gave Grendel his own book. When they broke into the color field, they said, "Do you have any idea you want us to consider? We're trying to decide what to do for our first color book." And I had had this idea for MAGE kicking around for a while, so I presented it to them, and they liked it.

BILL: *But when you began working for DUCK WORK, you didn't just pick up a pencil and suddenly become an artist. You must have had some training. Did you draw when you were a little boy?*

MATT: Oh, yes. My mother constantly tells her friends that when I was three I was always asking, "Mommy, draw me a cow," and I could already draw one better than she could — which is not great achievement. She's pretty hideous with a pencil. Ever since I was a child, drawing was what I always wanted to do.

BILL: *And you read comics when you were a kid?*

MATT: Yeah. I was a big SUPERMAN fan. Still am. He's kind of a revered figure. Superman is *the* superhero to me. The Great American Myth.

He's witty, charming, kind to children — and completely amoral. He wears a Harlequin mask and carries a deadly, electrified fork. He's Grendel, the likeable assassin. Words and art by Matt Wagner, from GRENDEL #2.

BILL: *Were you ever active in fandom? Or were you just a guy who read comics?*

MATT: I went to a few conventions.

BILL: *Did you ever meet any pros who might have given you professional advice?*

MATT: No, I was always a little too shy to show my work to any pros.

BILL: *Who would you name as being influential on your art?*

MATT: As far as comics go — because my comic work is very different from the il-

© 1983 Matt Wagner

"Batman is as psychotic as the criminals

© 1984 Elliott Waugner

Argent the bestial cop meets Grendel. "Most of the fans I've talked to like Grendel better than Argent, even though Argent's the 'good guy.'" Matt Wagner pencils, Reggie Byers inks, from Grendel #3.

lustrative work that I do outside of comics — I would say **Frank Miller** and **Will Eisner**. I pretty much go along with their philosphy that — to paraphrase **Edgar Allan Poe** on the short story which, effectively, a comic book is — every word and every line has to tell the story. I believe in economy. Everything has to be simple and straight to the point.

BILL: *What kind of illustration work do you do outside of comics?*

MATT: Nothing professional, yet. Just things on my own — drawing, painting, for my own pleasure.

BILL: *Thinking of doing anything professionally with it?*

MATT: Well, actually, I've been hoping to meld it a little bit with comics. I've been working on something I'd like to submit to **Archie Goodwin** for EPIC. It's an adaptation of a children's poem called MERLIN AND THE SNAKE'S EGG. I'd like it to be a series of five full-page paintings that would tell the story.

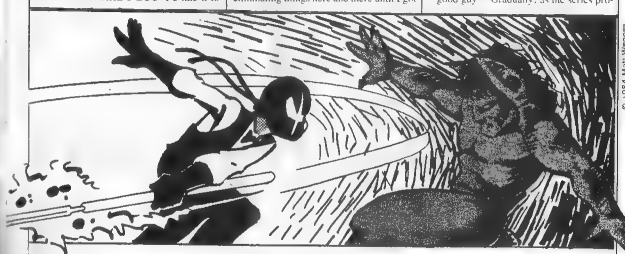
BILL: *Any particular illustrators that have influenced you, in regard to this aspect of your work?*

MATT: The great ones, such as **N. C. Wyeth, Howard Pyle** — you can learn anything you want to know from those two — **Alphonse Mucha, Maxfield Parrish,** and **Joseph Clement Coll**, who was one of the big inspirations for **Kaluta's** work — his pen work, anyway.

BILL: *How did you get the idea for Grendel? Was it from BEOWULF?*

MATT: Actually it wasn't. I was doing some sketches and decided to do a comic where the villain was the main character. And I started doing some sketches of a clown-like mask. Originally, the mask was a little more elaborate, with clown-type eyebrows and a big smile. And then I started eliminating things here and there until I got down to this thing which I thought was graphic enough and Harlequin-ish enough. The villain was going to be handsome underneath the mask, and dancer-like, while his opposite would be a bestial, wolf-like creature that I came up with — Argent.

Originally, GRENDEL was going to be done in a more detailed graphic style than it's done in. But I was having some trouble with it, and then I decided to draw Grendel like a Japanese cartoon. It seemed to fit the character very well. But I couldn't seem to make Argent fit into that mold. The girl I was dating at the time said, "So, just leave him as he is." I said, "Okay, we'll try that." And it seemed to work very well. He's rougher and more detailed than the smooth lines of Grendel. What I wanted to get across in the strip is that evil and good are sometimes indistinguishable in real life. Most of the fans I've talked to like Grendel better than Argent, even though Argent's the "good guy." Gradually, as the series pro-



© 1984 Matt Wagner

he chases — maybe *more* psychotic."

gresses, Argent and Grendel come grudgingly to realize that they are more alike than they would care to admit. The series is in black and white because I wanted to get across is that in the real world there are no black and whites. You can't say, "This person is totally despicable," or "This person is a beatific saint."

BILL: *Any new projects coming up in the future?*

MATT: Well, I'm finishing up GRENDEL. GRENDEL's going to be a six-issue limited series, while MAGE is fifteen issues. I don't like stories that drag on to the end of time. Stories have beginnings and ends. They don't exist forever. But after they end, I have a few more projects I'm working on. I had tentatively talked to some other people about working together. **Bill Anderson** and I want to work on something together. We're not sure why yet. *(Laughter.)* **Bill Willingham**, who's doing WARP for First Comics and did THE ELEMENTALS for Texas Comics and now for Comico, had spoken about working together sometime, and we still plan to do it, but we're not sure when that's going to happen. MAGE is slated to run two-and-a-half years — and during that time I would like to do some fill-in stuff here and there, and that poem adaptation for Epic. But past that I haven't really made any plans. I've thought a lot of times about doing BATMAN. Not an extended run — maybe one issue. It would be a big thrill. I think BATMAN has been screwed up in so many different ways at so many different times that the character doesn't have any continuity any more. That's unfortunate because Batman has the potential to be one of the best characters in comics. The editors have never been able to decide what they want to do with him — whether they want him to be nice or mean or whatever.

BILL: *How do you think BATMAN should be done?*

MATT: Batman should be a maniac. He should go through a lot of inner turmoil. Batman is as psychotic as the criminals he chases — maybe *more* psychotic. A lot of people have seen their parents or their loved ones shot down in real life, but they didn't spend their entire lives building themselves into a perfect fighting machine to go out and destroy all criminals. He has a driven obsession that should be played up — and was played up very well for a time by **Englehart** and **Rogers.** Their version was just wonderful.

BILL: *Did I read someplace that you were doing something for Marvel?*

MATT: Yes, you did. *(Laughter.)*

BILL: *Was that incorrect?*

MATT: That's *very* incorrect! And I have a five-page back-up MOON KNIGHT story that **Bill Anderson** is inking, and it's turning out nicely. But Marvel doesn't know it exists.

BILL: *But you'd like Marvel to publish it?*

MATT: Yeah, we're going to submit it when it's done. Bill does it between other assignments and so it's taking a good while to be completed.

BILL: *Do you feel the alternatives are your home and you'll just make forays into the mainstream, or would you like to straddle both worlds?*

MATT: I haven't decided yet. I like the freedom you get in the alternatives, but I like the wider audience you reach in the mainstreams. I know that whatever I do next, I would like to do just one thing — *just* pencilling, or *just* writing instead of trying to do *everything* like I do with MAGE and GRENDEL. I'd like to slow down a little bit.

"I've thought a lot of times about doing BATMAN. It would be a big thrill. BATMAN has been screwed up so many different ways." Art by Matt Wagner

The Batman is © 1984 DC Comics, Inc

"COMICS JOURNAL has more space which

GARY GROTH & KIM THOMPSON

Fantagraphics will soon be moving to California, so before they escaped the East Coast I finally made good on my longstanding vow to beard Gary and Kim in their lair and turn the tables on them for a penetrating look at their publishing operations. The interview was conducted at the lavish Fantagraphics mini-mansion in Stamford, Connecticut, on the night they were throwing an open party, and I couldn't help but notice how much it all resembled a scaled-down version of Hugh Hefner's vaunted publishing lifestyle. Mike Catron stepped in midway to offer additional observations as we discussed everything from COMICS JOURNAL to AMAZING HEROES to the state of mainstream comics and the role of Fantagraphics' independent titles in a marketplace dominated by Marvel...

DAK: *Why do you hate comics?*

GARY GROTH: Oh, God . . .

KIM THOMPSON: Couldn't we start with background and sort of ease our way in?

GARY: "What in your background causes you to hate comics?" *(Laughter.)*

DAK: *Was it environment or was it genetic?*

GARY: A combination of syphilis and leprosy.

DAK: *When it comes to basic background, I remember you used to publish fanzines back when I published fanzines.*

GARY: We're old chums.

DAK: *Only by mail!* (Laughter.)

GARY: You're qualifying things already.

DAK: *Anyway, how did you go from publishing a couple of small fanzines to having this empire that rivals Marvel in its early days?*

GARY: I published fanzines when I was a teenager. This was in the late Sixties. I had always read comics when I was a kid, so I started publishing a fanzine called FANTASTIC FANZINE in 1967. I quit publishing in '71 or '72, went to college and had kind of a sporadic college education where I attended four different colleges in four years. Then, in my last year of college — I was in the University of Maryland studing Journalism — we decided to buy and salvage the JOURNAL from the original publishers in Texas.

THE COMICS JOURNAL: does it pander to sensationalism and negativism?

This seemed to be a natural segue, because it coincided with my interest in comics and my interest in earning a living by being self-employed.

DAK: *So you didn't start the JOURNAL?*

GARY: We took it over with issue #27. It was primarily an advertising vehicle in direct competition with THE BUYER'S GUIDE, but we completely reorganized it and reconstructed it.

DAK: *Who's "we"?*

GARY: **Mike Catron** and I. Kim came on around issue #30.

KIM: Actually, the very first thing I remember doing was filling in blacks on the paste-up boards of COMICS JOURNAL #36.

DAK: *Gary, how did you and Mike get together?*

GARY: We were old friends. We went to the University of Maryland together, so it was just a natural partnership.

DAK: *How did you come in, Kim?*

KIM: For various odd reasons, I'd been around the world three times, lived in a bunch of different countries, and picked up a love of comics in the process — both American and, even more so, French comics. In 1977, when the JOURNAL was changing from tabloid to magazine format, I had ended up in Washington, DC. I went up to visit Mike and Gary. At that particular junction, Mike had received a job offer from DC Comics, and was seriously considering it — except that he was worried because he didn't

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enables us to offend more people in fewer issues."

want to jeopardize the magazine. So Mike went to New York, to work for DC, and I essentially replaced Mike as managing editor, typist, took over all his functions at the JOURNAL. At that point, Gary and I were doing it all — including putting mailing labels on the issues.

GARY: The right time at the right place, depending on your point of view.

KIM: Yes. And I also put a few bucks into the magazine, which otherwise would have gone under, because during that entire first year Gary and I were together — the magazine was always on the very brink of catastrophe.

GARY: It was a shoestring operation from the beginning, because we had no capital. We were twenty years old, I was still in college — I also had a job at the time — and since we had virtually no capital I was hustling around to get credit to print the NOSTALGIA JOURNAL. As Kim just said: when he came on, we were really on the brink of financial catastrophe.

KIM: The only way we were able to keep the magazine going — because it was not making any money at all — was for both Gary and me to hold down full-time jobs. Then we'd go home and work all night — sometimes literally — on THE COMICS JOURNAL. We'd each work forty hours a week, and then come back and work another forty on the magazine.

DAK: *At some point it changed from an ad magazine to THE COMICS JOURNAL.*

GARY: Yeah, with issue #37 we changed the format, out of desperation, because it wasn't going anywhere as an ad magazine. Trying to get distributors to take it was a dead end. At that time there were only two distributors — **Phil Seuling** and **Bud Plant**. They bought out the press run of

VITAL STATISTICS

Name: Gary Groth
Born: 1954, Buenos Aires, Argentina
Residence: Stamford, CT
Occupation: Publisher, editor, writer
Favorite TV Show: FIRING LINE
Favorite Critics: John Simon, Dwight MacDonald, Cynthia Ozick, Brigid Brophy, Robert Brustein, Stanley Kauffmann
Favorite Novelists: Christopher Isherwood, John Knowles, William Gaddis
Favorite Comics: LOVE AND ROCKETS, JOURNEY, RAW, DALGODA, SWAMP THING, AMERICAN SPLENDOR, WILL EISNER'S QUARTERLY
Perferred Music: Louis Armstrong, Coleman Hawkins, Art Tatum, Ben Webster, Oscar Peterson
Favorite Movies: IPHEGANIA, CHINATOWN, DINER, THE WILD BUNCH, GOLDFINGER
Most Fascinating Attribute: The ability to type 90 words per minute with two fingers.
Pet Peeve: Negative people

VITAL STATISTICS

Name: Kim Thompson
Born: 25 September 1956 — Copenhagen, Denmark
Occupation: Publisher, Editor, Production Manager, Typesetter, Translator
Favorite Comics: RAW, SWAMP THING, CEREBUS, JOURNEY, ZOT!, LOVE AND ROCKETS, DALGODA, and AMERICAN FLAGG! Plus the work of *many* European cartoonists, including Herge, Tardi, Pratt, Munoz & Sampayo, Franquin, Tillieux, Bretecher, etc. ad infinitum
Favorite Comics-Producing Country: Belgium
Favorite Job: Translating
Neatest Place I Ever Lived: Martinique (West Indies)
Rock 'n' Roll Heroes: Lou Reed, David Bowie, Talking Heads, Elvis Costello and, above and beyond all, Iggy Pop.
Pet Peeves: There's a magazine that covers that: THE COMICS JOURNAL.
Favorite Movie: DAWN OF THE DEAD

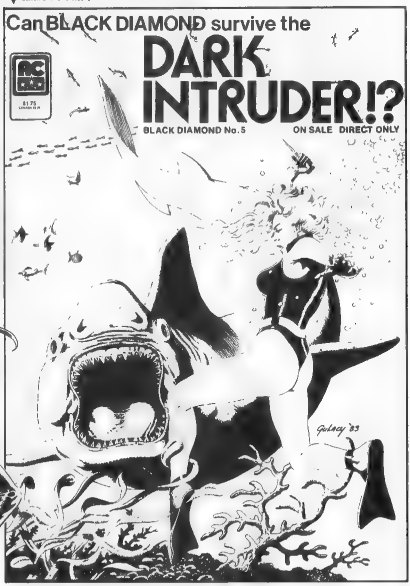
BLACK DIAMOND

BLACK DIAMOND created by MIKE FRANKOVICH, JR.
BLACK DIAMOND copyright SHOREHAM PRODUCTIONS 1984

BLACK DIAMOND means mystery, intrigue and exotic adventure as we follow the exploits of Tiana Mathews, the beautiful but dangerous lady spy. Every issue finds **BLACK DIAMOND** in the thick of it battling foreign spies, the agents of QUANSA, terrorists and the like.

The back-up strip is **COLT**, the voluptuous masked weapons mistress.

STORY: DON GEORGEAU
ART: LEONID KUSSMAN



LOOK AT US NOW!

"In comics, there's enormous enthusiasm for crap."

the first magazine issue! So we converted THE JOURNAL into a magazine with issue #37 primarily to save it — and with that change, we changed the whole focus and concept of the magazine, editorially.

KIM: But we're still consistent. If you go back and read the tabloid issues, the . . . uh . . . editorial viewpoint *(laughter.)* —

GARY: For lack of a better term.

KIM: — is actually consistent. For example, a very early tabloid issue featured a somewhat berserk, vicious interview with someone named **David Anthony Kraft**, remember? *(Laughter.)* That caused some ripples.

DAK: *Ah, yes.*

KIM: So I guess the major change is that now we have a lot more editorial space — which enables us to offend a lot more people in a lot fewer issues. *(Laughter.)*

DAK: *Did the changes help sales?*

GARY: Sure, because we were able to sell on newsstands, where before we were sold only by subscription. The whole rationale for switching to a magazine format was that we could be sold on newsstands. So we virtually quadrupled our circulation.

KIM: We went from selling 2,000 copies to 8,000. It made the difference between success and failure.

DAK: *And now, you have how many — eight, is it? — people on staff, counting yourselves?*

GARY: We also have some support people who are not on staff. **Rick Marshall** is the editor of NEMO. We have a couple of typesetters, and various people who come in — teenagers who do mailing for us, stuff like that. Basically, the drudge work we used to do. Now that we're publishing moguls, we don't have to do that.

DAK: *These days, you even have enough capital to launch color comics?*

GARY: Yes.

DAK: *How does it feel, being on the other side?*

KIM: As **Dudley Moore** says in ARTHUR, "Well, it doesn't suck."

DAK: *Are you ready to take the flak as a publisher of comics that you used to dish out?*

GARY: Sure, I'm very good at taking flak.

DAK: *So let's get back to the nitty-gritty. Why do you hate comics?*

GARY: I think that's a misconception.

DAK: *Why do you think that misconception has sprung up?*

GARY: Obviously, it's because of the stringent tone of the editorials I write and the tone of the magazine in general. I think the JOURNAL was the first magazine about comics that really applied vigorous and elevated standards to the medium. And I think the natural consequence in doing that is that people think you hate comics. But that strikes me as a reactionary attitude.

KIM: I think it's based on a very shallow reading of the material we publish. Even if you read the negative reviews, you can tell it's based on a profound love for the medium.

DAK: *For the medium, perhaps — but could you really say that you like comics? If you were to take a three-foot-high stack of comics, could you, Gary,* really *tell me you liked them?*

GARY: Well, I could tell you I liked *some* of them *(Laughter.)*

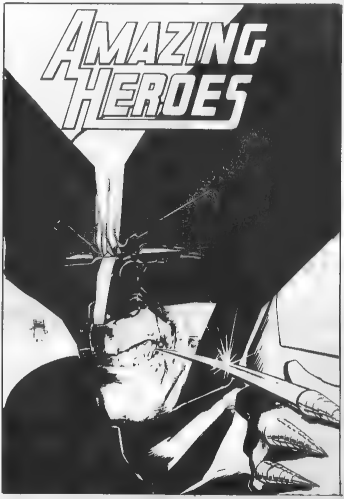
DAK: *What are some of the comics that you think are good, today?*

GARY: I like JOURNEY, I like AMERICAN . . . SPLENDOR.

DAK: *I like that pregnant pause!*

GARY: Naturally, I like the material we're doing . . . LOVE AND ROCKETS. I like material in RAW, I like some of the undergrounds coming out, WEIRDO —

A Bill Sienkiewicz cover for AMAZING HEROES #55.



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COL. CANYON, THE TOUGH PART IS NOT KNOWING WHAT HAPPENED TO DOE REDWOOD!
YES, QUIZ, THEY COULD BE TORTURING HER AT THIS MOMENT!
THE "TORTURE" BEGINS!
TELL ME! TELL ME!
WAS THAT A REAL GORILLA HOLDING KISS RAY WRAY?

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"RONIN's better than 90% of comics. But is it good?"

THANKS FOR THE NICE DINNER, DUKE. WELL, THE BEER WAS GOOD ANYWAY. WHAT'S THE MATTER, WAS THE FOOD THAT BAD?
NO. I'M JUST NOT USED TO BEING STARED AT, THAT'S ALL.
BAR
OH, YOU'LL GET USED TO IT IN NO TIME. IT'S JUST THAT NOBODY TRUSTS NOBODY IN THIS TOWN.
ZONX

© 1983 Jaime Hernandez

Wrestles-adventuress Rena Titanon goes out for a night on the town (above) after a workout with the dreaded Bull Marie (below). Words and art by Jaime Hernandez. From LOVE AND ROCKETS #3.

KIM: SWAMP THING, with **Alan Moore's** writing.

GARY: Yeah . . .

KIM: I like a certain amount of the material that appears in HEAVY METAL. I like CEREBUS.

GARY: Conspicuous silence. *(Laughter.)*

KIM: I like ZOT! a lot.

GARY: I publish lists of what I like in THE COMICS JOURNAL . . .

KIM: Just to prove there's stuff he likes.

GARY: Yeah. I like a lot of European material.

DAK: *Is there anything you particularly dislike?*

GARY: Oh, hell . . . where does one start?

KIM: There's stuff that's just awful, there's stuff that's mediocre where you know the guy could do better if he tried, and there's stuff that's not very good and yet is praised a lot, which sort of annoys you — so there are several levels of badness. For example, I go on record as hating RONIN, but RONIN is still better than 90% of the stuff that's put out today.

GARY: This is a real trap that fans get into — I'm talking about hardcore fans — feeling that, everything being comparative, comic books having created their own debased standards, that you have to judge comics by the standards that mainstream comics have themselves created. This is a real trap that seduces you into liking stuff that really has very little merit. Kim just mentioned that RONIN's better than 90% of the other comics. And that's true. But is it good? That's the pertinent question. The JOURNAL doesn't skirt that question, which partly explains why I am so often condemned as hating comic books.

DAK: *I know people in the industry who look forward to THE COMICS JOURNAL simply because there are fireworks in it.* (Laughter.) *I would think that's part of its appeal.*

KIM: We've been accused of pandering to controversy and negativism simply to sell the magazine, but I maintain — and the instantaneous success of AMAZING HEROES proves this — that we would

© 1983 Jaime Hernandez

"The American public perceives comics as

sell a lot more copies if we backed off a little, compromised our standards, were a little more cautious. THE COMICS JOURNAL very much represents what we want to say and what our intentions are and what our opinions are. I don't think it's compromised to any degree by what sells and what doesn't.

DAK: *Are you saying that AMAZING HEROES, by contrast, is?*

KIM: AMAZING HEROES has a different set of aims. How can I put this? *(Laughter.)* AMAZING HEROES was put on the market to fill the void left by THE COMIC READER's passing as any kind of viable magazine.

DAK: *You think TCR has passed?*

KIM: I'm going to sound like I'm dumping on the competition now, but I think THE COMIC READER is totally outdated. I don't think it's aware of what's going on. It appeals to fans who are stuck back in the Sixties.

GARY: And therein lies its naive charm.

KIM: Yeah. And it just keeps hanging on, grimly. AMAZING HEROES is a happy, fun-filled magazine that we're putting out for folks who enjoy comics. In AMAZING HEROES, I tend — within reason — to promote things that I like, but might not fit in exactly with most fans' tastes. In a sense, it functions almost like THE COMICS JOURNAL does, in introducing people to something new, although it obviously takes a less radical stance than THE JOURNAL. It's sort of a primer to THE COMICS JOURNAL in a lot of ways. It's a fun magazine and I get a lot of compliments on it. And it's enjoyable to put together, too.

DAK: *Gary, do you have anything to do with AMAZING HEROES?*

GARY: It's pretty much Kim's.

DAK: *And THE COMICS JOURNAL is pretty much your domain?*

GARY: My baby.

DAK: *What about the other Fantagraphics publications? Which ones reflect your viewpoint, Gary, and which ones reflect your viewpoint, Kim? How do you decide what to publish?*

GARY: Well, the efforts that reflect our unqualified viewpoints, of course, are AMAZING HEROES, which is Kim's, and THE COMICS JOURNAL, which

A scene from the highly-acclaimed "Heartbreak Soup," by 'Bert Hernandez. From LOVE & ROCKETS #6.

OHHHH .. THAT WAS A GOOD IDEA .. LIKE A BOILER IN THERE HYP.. LOTS OF CREEPS HANGING OUT TONIGHT.
PUT THIS ON, FOR CHRIST'S SAKE.. ..IF YOUR GIRLS COULD SEE YOU...
WHAT ? ARCHIE.. WHAT-WHAT'S WRONG ..? I WAS ONLY DANCING ... YOU BRING ME HERE TO DANCE ..!
YOU WEREN'T DANCING, YOU WERE-- --SHOWING OFF! JUST ABOUT FALLING OUT OF YOUR DRESS..!
OH... OH, SO ALL OF A SUDDEN YOU DON'T APPROVE OF GOD'S DESIGN FOR MY FIGURE ANY MORE, EH?
OH, COME ON, IN THAT DRESS, YOU--
..YOU TOLD ME YOU LIKED THIS DRESS, ARCHIE!

© 1984 Gilbert Hernandez

moron literature — which they are, mostly."

is mine. NEMO is entirely **Rick Marschall's**. I'm also editing DALGODA and LOVE AND ROCKETS. Now, I think editing is a fragile and, by necessity, an organic process, and that there's always the danger of doing more harm than good by editing — or over-editing. **Jaime** and **Gilbert Hernandez**, in particular, write and draw comics using a voice that's very much their own; I'm extremely wary of tampering with their work because I simply wouldn't presume to know their voice and their vision as intimately as they do. Not only have they established a voice of their own, but idioms of their own, and you've got to be very careful about suggesting changes or "improvements." There's an authenticity to their work that I wouldn't want to disrupt. Jaime and Gilbert and I talk generally about their work, and I point out strengths and weaknesses and suggest directions in which I think they should go. I think this is probably the healthiest kind of relationship an editor can have with creative people. I believe in publishing artists who want to do the kind of books I want to publish, and then letting them do what they do best. Which is why I'm able to edit so many books. *(Laughter.)*

KIM: A small amendation to what Gary said: AMAZING HEROES may represent my unqualified viewpoint insofar as I'm the ultimate authority on what goes into each issue (and have been since #7), but it's very heavily qualified by the marketing exigencies of the magazine as it has been established. If I were to disregard the necessities of the marketplace entirely, I'd end up with a second COMICS JOURNAL. Which is a somewhat terrifying thought.

As Gary said, I'm in charge of THE SURVIVORS! I'm also in charge of our new PRINCE VALIANT series. These are things on which I'm acting largely as a go-between: the material and its packaging are for all intents and purposes predetermined by the other publishers with whom we're collaborating.

There is so much give-and-take at Fantagraphics that it's somewhat difficult to explain exactly who does what, especially on the conceptual level. As a very rough — *very* rough — distinction, Gary is the Editor and I'm the Production Manager. And I can assure you that acting as Production Manager for our entire line doesn't leave me a lot of time for editing.

DAK: *Gary, the usual progression in fandom is often from being a fan to publishing a fanzine to becoming a comics professional. Why do you think you didn't follow that progression, stopping short of the last step?*

GARY: Well, let me tell you an interesting story that you're probably aware of — since it involves you. In 1973, I was offered a job at Marvel by **Roy Thomas**, and I was very tempted to take it. I was living in Maryland at the time, and I had completed one year of college, and I was taking a sabbatical for a year. I was working and planning to return to college the following year. I was very tempted to take it, but ultimately I didn't, for personal reasons. I suggested to Roy — because I think he needed an assistant editor at the time — that he call you. So I was instrumental in getting you into Marvel. And you never held it against me! I appreciate that.

KIM: What a great WHAT IF? story that would make. *(Laughter.)*

© 1982 Gil Kane

Fantagraphics reprinted Gil Kane's graphic novel SAVAGE! with this new cover.

DAK: *To think, Gary, you would have written THE SHE-HULK!*

GARY: And you would have been sued.

DAK: *I think it's been a fair arrangement.* (Laughter.) *But why did you avoid the opportunity? I mean, most people who like comics and publish fanzines admire the field, and want to work in it. Why did you shy away?*

GARY: Could it be that I'm a rugged individualist? Actually, I should point out that when Roy offered me the job, I was only involved in comics peripherally. I might have published a fanzine called WORD BALLOONS around that time, but I wasn't even thinking of comics in terms of earning a living. I wasn't thinking of going into comics — I wasn't thinking of starting a company or publishing a magazine about comic books or publishing actual comic books. I had given up reading

"AMERICAN FLAGG should represent

comics altogether when I went to college from '72 to '75. In fact, I missed the whole sort of quasi-Renaissance period with **Gerber** and **Englehart** and **McGregor**.

KIM: And **Kraft**.

DAK: *Thank you.*

GARY: So I wasn't thinking of a career in comics. In fact, at that time I was probably very confused as to what I was going to do at all. I was interested in a career in journalism

DAK: *Have you ever had any aspiration to write comic books?*

GARY: No, not really. And the reason is that I don't think I could meet my own standards. *(Laughter.)* I think I could meet other people's standards, but I don't really think I could do comics as well as I'd like to see them done. I don't think I could write comics as well as the **Hernandez** brothers, for example, or as well as **Harvey Pekar**, or **R. Crumb**. So, unlike many people in this profession, I'd rather not write substandard material just to do it.

DAK: *Now that you've found a direction, are you going to form a publishing empire?*

GARY: We don't really have any long-term plans. Our plans extend only to the next two or three years, and one of our ambitions is to publish a number of newspaper-strip reprint books, including POLLY AND HER PALS and LITTLE ORPHAN ANNIE.

KIM: And, of course, POPEYE, which everyone knows about at this point. We're also interested in reprinting English versions of the best European material. We're currently working on a **Jacques Tardi** project. There's other projects we have our eyes on. Essentially, it's a matter of being able to sell enough copies to break even.

DAK: *Is it possible? Can you sell enough copies to make a living and keep it an ongoing enterprise.*

(Mike Catron enters.)

GARY: Just barely.

KIM: One of the things we're trying to do, like everybody else, is to break out of the market, because it's become more and more evident that contrary to what some people might say — like **Mike Friedrich** — the market is not expanding indefinitely. I think it's almost reached its limit now, and yet you have an incredible profusion of new publishers and new products. And everyone except you-know-who is feeling the crunch these days. So the solution is to expand outside the market. Producing albums is an attempt to move in that direction. It's very difficult to get comic books into any outlets other than the standard comic-book outlets because comic books are such a low-profit item and are looked upon — for the most part, justifiably so — with a great amount of scorn. Publishing the albums and publishing the strip reprints is one of the ways to get around this. POPEYE is a step in that direction. We are pretty sure we can get POPEYE into bookstores.

A change of pace for writer-artist **Jaime Hernandez** — **"Out O' Space," from LOVE AND ROCKETS #4.**

UH... ROCKY? YOU DIDN'T REALLY WANT THIS PLANET, D'YOU? WHY NOT GIVE IT UP TO THIS NICE GENTLEMAN. PLEEZE...?
HECK NO, WE WON'T GO! LOOK, MONSTER MAN, IF YOU WANT THIS PLANET SO BAD, YOU'RE GONNA HAVE TO FIGHT FOR IT. ¿COMPRENDE?
OH, YEAH? LISTEN, BITCH! IF YOU DON'T GET OFF MY PLANET RIGHT NOW I'M GOING TO DESTROY YOUR BRAINS!
© 1983 Jaime Hernandez

the level of mediocrity in comics."

DAK: *Since Rick Marschall not only edits NEMO for you, but also works for Dargaud, have you ever considered allying with them? They seem to have distirbution of a sort you don't.*

KIM: There's always a lot of talk among independent publishers, but since we're all such rugged individualists, nothing has really happened. We may be forced into it by virtue of the . . . overwhelming . . .

GARY: "Glut," you were going to say?

KIM: The overwhelming *strength* of some of the publishers in the marketplace. *(Laughter.)* They know who they are. No comment is necessary. As for an alliance, since a lot of independent publishers have different attitudes, different aims and goals and ways of doing things, nothing has really come of it.

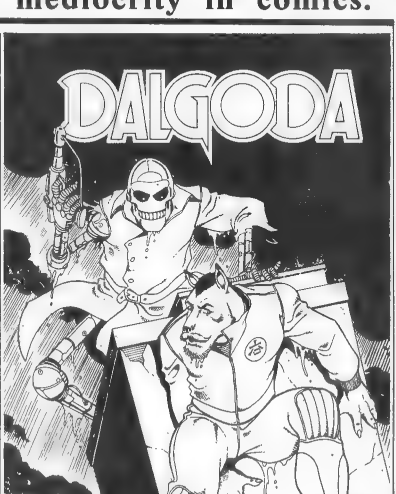
Nowadays, any independent publisher is skating on thin ice. No matter how good you are or together you seem, you might be heading for that really thin patch of ice and — *Crack! Glub!* — that's the last anyone will ever see of you! I don't think any of the independent publishers at this point are invulnerable, and only one, First Comics, is genuinely solid. I suspect that in a lot of cases, the accountants are adding up the figures and getting very close to the red. This includes publishers who are putting out a lot of comics and look like they're doing very well.

I was not at all surprised when Capital went under. My reaction was, "Oh, well, there goes the first one." I believe there'll be a lot more.

DAK: *Given that NEXUS was fairly well-liked, in a fairly small field, why were you not surprised?*

KIM: Because NEXUS was a good comic. *(Laughter.)* No, that's a little too cynical, the thing is, it doesn't matter how many comics you're putting out —the bottom line isn't even how many you sell, it's the profit margin, and that's affected by so many other subtle variables. You go back to LIFE magazine, which had an incredible circulation at the time it originally folded, but it just couldn't make any money. One of the reasons Capital's stuff couldn't make any money was a combination of high production standards and sales that might have been respectable with lower production standards, but couldn't cover their nut as it was.

With all these variables, it's impossible to tell who'll go next. But if we're all around by next summer, I shall be very, very surprised.



Dalgoda, emissary from Canida — planet of the sentient dogs — is menaced by a Z-28 killer drone, as depicted on the back cover of DALGODA #2. Art by Dennis Fujitake.

DAK: *Considering your editorials castigating publishers for being motivated by profit, do you find any irony, Gary, to having to chase this profit margin yourself?*

GARY: Well, it's always problematic, but we've solved it primarily through low overhead, and the fact that we don't make much money. We don't demand a lot of money to live. Our lifestyle is such that we don't need a lot of money.

KIM: We work so much we don't have time to spend our money.

GARY: Yeah. I don't know how to answer that . . .

KIM: In a capitalist society, you have to realize that the bottom line is, it has to balance out to at least a zero.

DAK: *Certainly, not all your projects make money? Given the fact that you publish a lot of titles, some of them have to end up in the red.*

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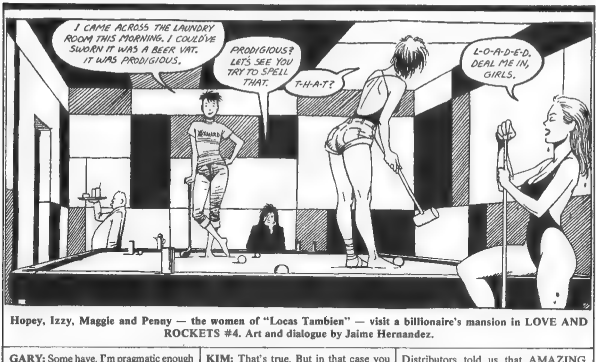
"Any independent is skating on thin ice. If we're


I CAME ACROSS THE LAUNDRY ROOM THIS MORNING. I COULDVE SWORN IT WAS A BEER VAT. IT WAS PRODIGIOUS.
PRODIGIOUS? LET'S SEE YOU TRY TO SPELL THAT.
T-H-A-T?
L-O-A-D-E-D. DEAL ME IN, GIRLS.
© 1983 Jaime Hernandez

Hopey, Izzy, Maggie and Penny — the women of "Locas Tambien" — visit a billionaire's mansion in LOVE AND ROCKETS #4. Art and dialogue by Jaime Hernandez.

GARY: Some have. I'm pragmatic enough to realize what project is and what project is not going to make money, and plan accordingly. Naturally, we try to balance things out. If something is popular, we'll make enough money to subsidize something that isn't very popular. It's a small-scale balancing act.

DAK: *Do you just decide, "We're going to expand," and look for more titles to publish?*

KIM: So far the material has pretty much come to us. We say, "Yeah, we'd really like to do that." I don't know of we've really gone after anything.

GARY: Well, we went after LOVE AND ROCKETS.

KIM: That's true. But in that case you got the comic and said, "Hey, I'd like to do that."

GARY: Yeah.

KIM: We never think in terms of publishing X number of comics. Obviously there's an incentive to produce more and more books, simply because your overhead stays the same.

DAK: *Was that a factor in going bi-weekly with AMAZING HEROES?*

KIM: Sure. Going bi-weekly with AMAZING HEROES was my idea. Basically, the industry was going through a real big expansion, there were a lot of new titles coming out, and I was filling up the magazine faster than I could put it out.

Distributors told us that AMAZING HEROES would sell out— roughly — in the first week or so. So what we would have is essentially three weeks of "dead" newsstand space. Since the magazine had the material to go twice monthly, and had gone to a smaller format at a lower price, we figured we could probably swing it. So we said, "What the hell."

GARY: Another reason we turned twice monthly with AMAZING HEROES was to increase the profit margin and allow us to do other projects.

MIKE CATRON: Actually, publishing AMAZING HEROES bi-weekly was part of my plan from the outset. It just took a year or two before everything was solid enough to make it work.

KIM: Gee, I thought your original plan was to put it out bi-*monthly*. At least, that's the way it worked out when you were editing it.

DAK: *The question is, are you going weekly?*

KIM: No, never!

DAK: *Since you made a late entrance, Mike, let me ask you a question. You're part of the original trio —*

KIM: Duo — depending on how far you want to go back.

DAK: *— and you're back with Fantagraphics. Yet according to Gary you were one of the people who went professional.*

VITAL STATISTICS

Name: Michael Catron
Born: 1954 — San Diego, CA
Residence: Stamford, CT
Occupation: Publisher, Circulation Director
Favorite Comics: SUGAR AND SPIKE, ANTHRO, BAT LASH, MARS, ZOT!, TWO-FISTED TALES, DALGODA, LOVE AND ROCKETS.
Hobbies and Interests: History (currently reading Toynbee), Science and Philosophy (most recently read THE TAO OF PHYSICS); chess; and (someday when I get around to it) sorting out my comic-book collection.
Most Interesting Comics in My Collection: MICKEY MOUSE MEETS THE AIR PIRATES and CANCELLED COMICS CAVALCADE
Pet Peeves: Semi-literates and impatient people

all around next summer I'll be very surprised."

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MIKE: If you can call it that. **Mike Gold** called me up one day and said, "Do you want a job?" At the time, COMICS JOURNAL wasn't doing well enough to support either Gary or me. So I went to work for Mike, doing publicity at DC. Then Mike fired me, and I went to work for **Sol Harrison** on a project that never got off the ground. For reasons that to this day I do not understand, I didn't lose my job in the infamous DC Implosion —

DAK: *One of the few.* (Laughter.)

MIKE: — but later that year, Sol fired me, too. So I called Gary in Maryland and said, "Now's the time to move to New York." But we both hate New York so we decided on Stamford. Now I handle all the circulation for all the magazines – that includes subscriptions and dealing with distributors — and the advertising. I juggle that for all the various magazines and take care of other kinds of general business material which Gary and Kim have no great interest in.

DAK: *Why don't we talk about the current state of comics?*

MIKE: It's boring.

GARY: Yeah, it is boring.

MIKE: Everybody's putting out the same old shit. *(Laughter.)* How has the product changed? I mean, we've got all these great royalty deals for everybody, but you couldn't tell from reading the comic books. Gary's been proven right. It hasn't materially altered what you read in comic books. .

KIM: I don't think that's entirely accurate. The market has expanded to the extent that you can produce material that's somewhat off the beaten track, if not entirely out of the bushes — material like CEREBUS and ELFQUEST and AMERICAN FLAGG and JOURNEY could not have happened before the existance of direct sales. In terms of the industry, deals with creators have radically changed. In terms of actual quality of the product, that's another matter.

MIKE: Which is my point, but I was only referring to mainstream comics.

GARY: The values of mainstream comics haven't changed in forty years. I think that's illustrated by the enormous popularity of Marvel's SECRET WARS, which in content and execution and conception is no different from a bad 1940s comic — it's just as simplistic, just as infantile, just as badly written, just as illiterate — and this is the most popular comic in direct sales now. And I think this speaks eloquently of the illiterate following of comic books.

In the mansion, Hopey and Izzy encounter a corpse, while Maggie (below) finds unexpected romance.

DAK: *Do you think the audience has changed? You could look at coloring books and say, "Coloring books were like this in 1932" — assuming they existed in 1932. Then you could say, "And they haven't improved since." Well, given that coloring books are directed to children, should they change? So I'm asking who you think the audience is, Gary — because if the audience hasn't changed, should the comics? Wouldn't that be like saying coloring books should be written for people who graduate from college?*

GARY: That's only if you regard coloring books as a viable art form.

DAK: *But you realize that to most of the world, there's no difference between comic books and coloring books.*

GARY: Not to most of the world — only to Americans.

DAK: *I keep hearing that, but is it true?*

I WOULDN'T HAVE... I SWEAR... ONLY, YOU LOOKED TO ME LIKE... LIKE YOU WANTED TO... LIKE YOU WANTED ME TO D... I...
I DID.
OH, GOD... I MUSTA BEEN CRAZY! I'M NO SEX MANIAC! IT'S JUST THAT... I... YOU DID??
WELL, YEAH... I DID...

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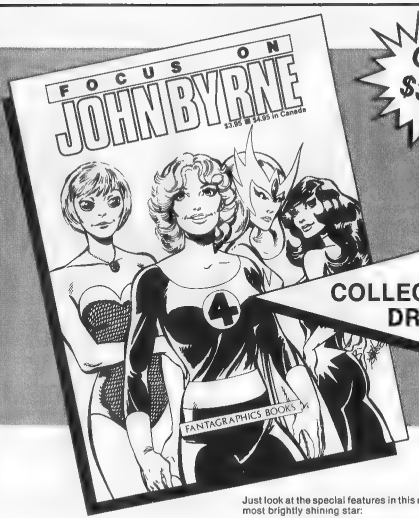

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"Comics' values have not changed in 40 years."

GARY: Oh, definitely.

MIKE: Definitely true in Europe.

GARY: In Europe, comics are considered much like film is considered in this country.

KIM: That's true. As someone who's lived in Europe for two-thirds of his life, I can vouch for that.

DAK: *Why is that?*

KIM: The easy answer is that comics are a lot better there. More subtly, I think that Europeans are more directly attuned to finer culture than Americans.

DAK: *If that's true, how do you explain the fact that* they're *attracted to our popular culture? Someone who recently returned from there told me that European critics are quite bitter, because American culture has become so widespread. DALLAS and DYNASTY, for example, are very popular in Europe.*

KIM: Well, there are *American* critics who are bitter about DALLAS and DYNASTY being popular here!

DAK: *My point is that, instead of European culture being exported to the States, it seems to be the reverse.*

GARY: That's always been the case.

KIM: I guess it's more immediately accessible.

GARY: It's called "cultural imperialism."

DAK: *I'm wondering what a lot of people who read THE COMICS JOURNAL must wonder: If you set the standards, how would things be different? For all your constant criticism of things as they are, how would you change them?*

GARY: I see all sorts of expressive possibilities in comics that just aren't being realized. I think the **Hernandez** brothers are exploring one facet of comics. If you look at the history of comics, and

Above and below: The first visitor from Canida makes a strong impression on the American public. Words by Jan Strnad, art by Dennis Fujitake. From DALGODA #1.

the dramatic potential of comics, you'll find very little has been accomplished. In fact, you can count the dramatists in comics on the fingers of one hand — **Kurtzman, Eisner, Spiegelman, Jaxon, Harvey Pekar.** Just a handful of people who have stretched the boundaries of what American comics can be. And you have to ask yourself why that is. The reason is that the values of comics have not changed in forty years. And the cultural consequences are that the American public perceives comics as being moron literature — which they are, for the most part.

KIM: Hardly a week goes by where you don't read a review of a bad movie that says, "This movie is like a comic book."

GARY: And this contempt and disdain for comics is almost cross-cultural. It crosses economic barriers, from upper to lower class. It's pervasive. So I think that the comic industry creates the environment,

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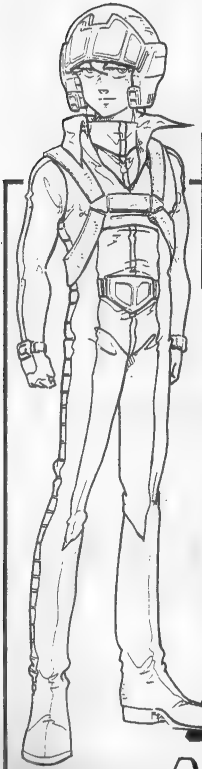

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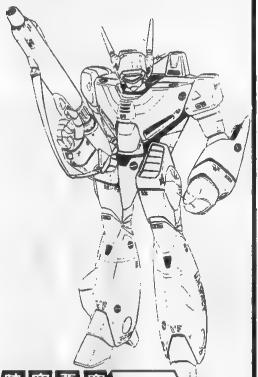

超時空要塞

マクロス

MACROSS

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Gary: "I don't think I could meet my own standards."

© 1984 Jan Strand and Dennis Fujitake

Dennis Fujitake's pencil roughs for DALGODA #2. Below, finished art, with dialogue by Jan Strnad.

a kind of sub-culture, and it's impossible to do anything with the sub-culture that might break the conventions that they've created and standardized.

DAK: *Can you say that television writing is at all elevated above comic books? Can you say the standards are any higher?*

GARY: Not substantially.

DAK: *So why isn't television disdained the way you say comic books are — cross-culturally. I don't see a great deal of difference between comic books, the way they're written now, and movies, the way they're written now, and television, the way it's written now. So why doesn't the public look down on television, the way you say it looks down on comics?*

GARY: I disagree entirely with you about movies, because you have quite a few extraordinary directors and writers working in this country. As far as television goes, conceptually, I agree with you. But, television also has a lot going for it that comics don't. First, you have real people, real actors on the screen, not these abstract characters running around on paper in silly-looking costumes beating each other up. You surmount a certain prejudice just by having real actors and real cars and the real outdoors on screen. I also tend to think television has acquired an acceptance and a legitimacy, no matter how speciously or illogically gained, by its antecedent relationship to theatre and film.

Television also has the advantage over comics of periodically being an important, sometimes even a profound, agent or vehicle for change, acting as a kind of mirror held up to a national character. I'm thinking of **Edward Murrow's** stand against **McCarthy** in the '50s, TV's coverage of Vietnam or the living room war, as **Michael Arlen** has called it, and **Watergate** in the '70s. There was also, in the area of imaginative work, the Golden Age of drama in the late '50s, which

Here, sweetheart—let me put some color in those cheeks!
Thanks, sweetheart. Here's a little something for yours.
POSEY RAVENCRAFT!

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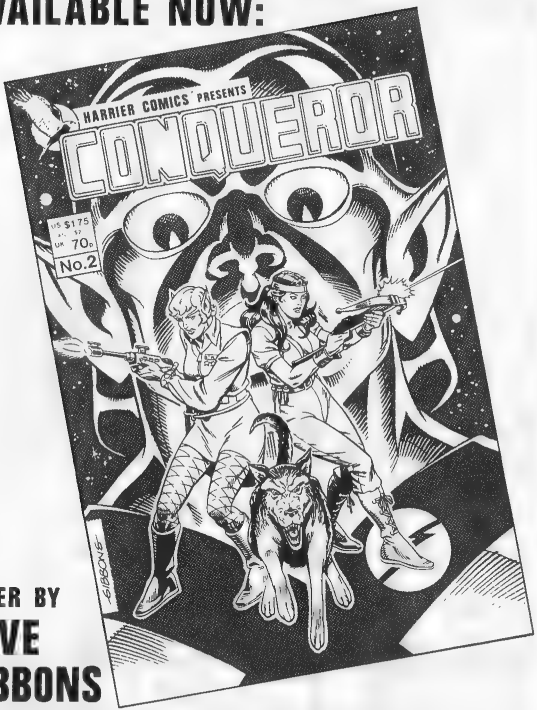

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"SECRET WARS is no different from a bad '40s comic — infantile, badly written, illiterate."

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COMICS JOURNAL honcho Gary Groth lambastes Marvel for allegedly pandering to low tastes with the SECRET WARS. But DAK asks, "How is that different from your publishing THE X-MEN COMPANION?"

proved television could deliver the goods if it wanted to, that the medium wasn't necessarily the message, to use **McLuhan's** debased trope.

But, comics occupy an even more marginal ghetto than television does in this country.

DAK: *So if you were at Marvel, Gary, what would change?*

GARY: I'm very pessimistic about a question like that, because I don't think anything can be done at Marvel.

KIM: Is there anyone at Marvel who is an independent power? If you go up to the editor-in-chief, he's responsible to the publisher. The publisher is responsible to the Board, and they're responsible to the stockholders. So if you get into a corporate situation, there is no one at the top who can actually make the decisions.

GARY: You have an editorial structure there, and a system, that's virtually impregnable. You'd virtually have to fire everyone up there, because you're fighting not only creators, you're fighting a value system. You know, it's a closed environment — it's like a prison environment. If you go to prison, you're going to adapt to that environment entirely. So whenever anyone goes to Marvel or DC, a writer or artist, he immediately adapts to the prevailing values, and he immediately starts turning out the same standardized product that everyone preceding them turned out. It doesn't matter who works there or what editors they hire. DC recently hired some new editors from outside comic books —

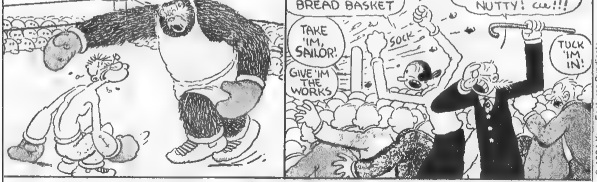
KIM: Alan Gold and **Janice Race.**

GARY: — but you wouldn't know it from the product. They adapt themselves to exactly what's required of them, which is to turn out the standardized product that has been turned out before. So obviously you need someone who knows comics, and has a different value system. Like me. *(Laughter.)*

KIM: Someone who came in with a different value system was **Harvey Kurtzman** at EC, but what you had there was a structure open enough to accommodate something like that. I don't know if that's possible nowadays.

DAK: *I guess what I was getting at is that, if you were in a position at Marvel fairly analogous to where you are now, an editor and a publisher, what would change? You know, Fantagraphics could be seen as a small version of Marvel — you make decisions to publish certain projects that bring in money to support some of your other projects that don't. How is Marvel's publishing SECRET WARS any different from your publishing THE X-MEN COMPANION? How could things be much different from what they are?*

"They're convinced the material they're


BONGO!
COME ON, POPEYE! SLAP 'IM IN THE BREAD BASKET
IF HE LICKS MY GORILLA I'LL GO NUTTY! cu!!!
TAKE 'IM, SAILOR!
SOCK
GIVE 'IM THE WORKS
TUCK 'IM IN!
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An excerpt from Fantagraphics Books' COMPLETE SEGAR POPEYE.

GARY: The answer is that they can't. *(Laughter.)* It's a hypothetical question in which there are too many variables. In other words, given the market situation, the ideal thing to do is publish SECRET WARS and to funnel the money into a lot of other projects diametrically opposed to it artistically — projects which obviously wouldn't make any money, but which would exemplify a cultural commitment. But, of course, nobody at Marvel could do that — you need an independent financial power to enable you to do that.

DAK: *I don't think there's any imperative that would prevent anyone from doing that. Are you saying that all creative decisions are motivated solely by money?*

GARY: No. I think cultural orientation or cultural values dictate what these people do. I want to point out that I don't think these people start out with the single-minded intention of making a bunch of money, I think that what they just happen to want to do appeals to the illiterate audience they've cultivated. It's very circular. Their own narrow interests collide precisely with the audience they're aiming at.

DAK: *Over to you, Kim.*

KIM: On top of everything else, I think they're quite legitimately convinced that the material they're putting out is good and valid. Isn't that incredible? *(Laughter.)*

DAK: *I think it's difficult to do any sort of work that requires a mental commitment — any sort of creative work —* without *being convinced that you're doing good work.*

KIM: Oh, I don't know. I'm convinced there are a lot of professionals who have worked a number of years in the business who have come to the realization that they're not doing very good work — but that it's better than sorting bottles at the plant. I think that there are people who are well aware of the very low level of craftsmanship they have achieved.

GARY: But it beats working for a living. Another thing is there's an enormous amount of enthusiasm behind a lot of crap.

DAK: *You have anything* nice *to say about mainstream comics?*

GARY: *(Long pause.)* I can't think of anything. *(Laughter.)*

KIM: I suppose they could be worse, but it's hard to conceive.

GARY: Highly unlikely. It's almost amazing that they're able to attract this kind of pre-cretinized talent. *(Laughter.)* Even the best mainstream comics, you know, are adulterated and polluted and corrupted — for example, a very good friend of ours said that AMERICAN FLAGG should represent the level of mediocrity in American comics.

DAK: *Honestly, now — you've both read AMERICAN FLAGG. Did either of you understand it?*

GARY: Well, I've only read the first five issues so far and — no, I'm a little lost.

KIM: I read the first six issues and have been hoping that when I get all the issues together and read through them, together, it will make sense at that point — but, at this point, I have to say that I'm fairly baffled.

DAK: *Do you guys ever find yourselves publishing material you are disappointed with?*

GARY: Yes. Everyone does.

DAK: *Earlier, you were saying that as an editor, you don't have a strong amount of input —*

GARY: That's true.

DAK: *— but isn't it the editor's job to exercise judgment?*

GARY: Yes, but the question remains one of how best to exercise judgment. I have rejected individual stories that the **Hernandez** brothers have sent, for example, that I didn't think were up to standard. I would talk to them about it, tell them that the story wasn't as good as what they're capable of doing, and using all the persuasive ability I can muster, I can usually get them to concur, and they'll do something else to fill those six or seven or eight pages. I exercise that much control over LOVE AND ROCKETS, and that's probably more beneficial in the long run than meddling with stories and making it a kind of committee effort. I'm frankly puzzled by what an editor does in comics.

DAK: *I can tell you what an editor does, if you want to know.*

KIM *(disingenuously helpful):* Dave was an editor at Marvel.

DAK (glares at Kim): *Not recently.* (Laughter.)

GARY: If looks could kill.

DAK: *When you have a lot of editors, they have to communicate with each other, which means they use a lot of Xeroxes, they don't have to pay phone bills, so they run up long-distance calls, and they have to insert grammatical mistakes and other such things into the script.* (Laughter.) *But in theory* a good *editor is a whole different matter.*

GARY: What does a good editor do?

DAK: *The same as a good editor in any field should do. Act as a source of sound advice, if someone has perhaps been too close to the work and made a questionable creative judgment.*

GARY: I'm not sure what I think of these theories whereby an editor shapes the material, and they have story conferences, and discuss plot points — I don't know what kind of work that yields, but I'm

putting out is good. Isn't that incredible?"

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inclined to think that it's far better to have a single unified vision — the creator's vision — rather than to have this vision tampered with by an editor.

That goes back to the beginnings of comics. Their highest priority was to put out product, so the editor acted as a kind of ringmaster in a circus, where he gathered people together and told them what to do, what kind of tone to strike, and so forth.

DAK: *Actually, you've answered your own question about what editors do today. They're ringmasters.*

GARY: Right. And it's perpetuated a hack system. It has made comic books a domain of hacks.

DAK: *There is a sort of common wisdom, a truism you hear today, that you should never edit your own material. But when you look at it, clearly the people who edited their own material did better work.*

GARY: That's traditionally been true, throughout the history of comics. The novelist **John Berger** said that — the **Max Perkins**es aside — the superior author should consult only himself. And I tend to agree with that. Whatever flaws you find in the material, it's at least a single unified vision, for good or ill.

DAK: *You agree, Kim?*

KIM: To some extent, yes, but I believe there are some major novelists whose work came in as a real mess and their editors cleaned it up and made it coherent.

GARY: In that case, my question would be — how good can an editor make it?

KIM: I'd say an editor is mainly concerned with matters of craft, and he can take something that has a vision and impose some craft onto it.

DAK: *There are films, for instance, that could have done with much better editors, regardless of content. Take the first CONAN movie. Had that been better edited —*

GARY: But when you talk about CONAN, you're talking about shit again, and does it really matter?

KIM: There's material that can be saved. From what I've read about a movie I liked — THE NIGHT THEY RAIDED MINSKY'S — the director, **William Friedkin**, delivered an incoherent mess of a film, and it was the editor who saved it. So it can be done.

GARY: I would tend to say that books and films that have to be saved shouldn't be made in the first place.

KIM: I don't think that's necessarily true. I can see where a relationship could develop between a director or a writer and an editor that can actually help bring the material to fruition.

DAK: *Not everybody is in absolute control of their craft or knows what they want to do, and they make messes along the way. Those messes need not always be a waste. Somebody might want to build a house, but only get as far as the foundation before going bankrupt. Somebody else could come along and finish it, without impairing the integrity of the house. You may or may not agree with my comparing construction to comics or movies, but I think there are messes that can be fixed, and the end result need not be bad. There are people who do work that —with the right editor — can be made much better. Maybe your viewpoint just doesn't take into account reality.*

GARY: Well, I try to take reality into account as often as I can. *(Laughter.)* I don't find much to argue with there. I certainly have nothing against creators discussing their work with people they respect — but I believe when you open up

Maggie imagines (?) that she's a stand-in superheroine in LOVE AND ROCKETS #3. Art and dialogue by Jaime Hernandez.

YOU'RE LOOKING REALLY FOR TOP FRIDAY. GO-GO GIRL. READY FOR SOME ACTION?
UM... SURE. ONLY, HOW DID GO-GO GIRL FIGHT IN THIS THING?
YOU KNOW, I FEEL STRONGER ALREADY.
OOH! DO YOU FEEL A DRAFT?

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"My personality is one that enjoys confrontation."

a floodgate where every author has an editor, and publishing companies become overloaded with editors, their primary function is to adulterate the product.

KIM: Their primary responsibility is to the company they work for, rather than the creator whose work they are editing.

GARY: We're trying to do material that is diametrically opposed to the values you find in mainstream comics.

DAK: *Maybe you can talk about what those values are.*

GARY: I'd like to see comics embody more complex values, more subtle values, I think they're capable of expressing as wide a range of emotions as films, and I don't see why these can't be explored in comics. Well, we know why — it comes out of a tradition that militated against this kind of artistic experimentation. Is there a **D. W. Griffith** or **Jean Renoir** of comics? And you always have to say, "Not really," or if there were — people like **Kurtzman** or **Elsner** — they've had virtually no substantial influence on comics, although they're given a lot of lip service.

Comics have traditionally been aimed low. They came from a pulp tradition, a kind of bootlegging gangster background. Money from bootlegging was funnelled into pulp magazines and later into comics. It was a *schockmeister* industry from the beginning, run by people who had nothing but contempt for the form, and this is the tradition from which comics spring. As a result, comics are an artistic ghetto, and being an artistic ghetto, comics evokes a kind of ghettoized response from people. I find this even true of me — and I think it is certainly true of the audience that has grown up reading comics and that now comprises the direct-sales market.

DAK: *Does DALGODA really differ from a Marvel Comic? Can you compare them, contrast the values?*

GARY: DALGODA has wit and grace and intelligence, and of what mainstream comic can that be said? *(Laughter.)*

KIM: I guess the differences are difficult to exactly nail down.

GARY: But that's our job.

KIM: Fortunately, we don't have to — and shouldn't — criticize DALGODA. We'll let other people do it for us.

DAK: *Given that you have made a case for why you've set certain standards and why you've taken certain stances with THE COMICS JOURNAL, how come some people still think you hate comics?*

GARY: Well, I think there are some people with whom you're not going to be able to communicate, to whom you're not going to be able to proselytize, without offending them. When you in effect insult somebody's taste or implied intelligence — because they're so rigidly connected to the material you're denigrating — I think they're going to be offended.

Gary Groth looking like a publisher.

KIM: If you attack people's beliefs, they're not going to like you.

GARY: Certainly, I'm not writing editorials to the converted.

DAK: *Right now, you're being sued by three different people. Why do you think you get sued so often?*

GARY: There are three different reasons. *(Laughter.)*

DAK: *Don't you bring it on yourself? For example, it seemed that Michael Fleisher just wanted an apology from you. Either at that point, or not long after he filed the lawsuit, you published a caricature of him with a cutline to the effect of, "Michael Fleisher — is he really the monster some people think he is?" Surely, you realized that could only fan the flames. Why did you do that?*

GARY: I'd like to talk about that, but I'm not sure I can without consulting my lawyer. Let me get around that by saying my personality is one that enjoys confrontation. *(Laughter.)*

KIM: I'd agree with that — whereas *(trying to keep a straight face)* I don't really like confrontations at all

DAK: *After the lawsuit was lodged, you also started publishing AMAZING HEROES under another corporate name — Redbeard, Inc. Was that a contingency plan in case you lost the suit against THE COMICS JOURNAL?*

GARY: We just wanted a clear corporate division between AMAZING HEROES and COMICS JOURNAL and our book projects.

KIM: Besides, we were tired of having one corporation. We decided we'd rather have three. One for each of us.

DAK: *Is there anything you can say about the three lawsuits pending against you?*

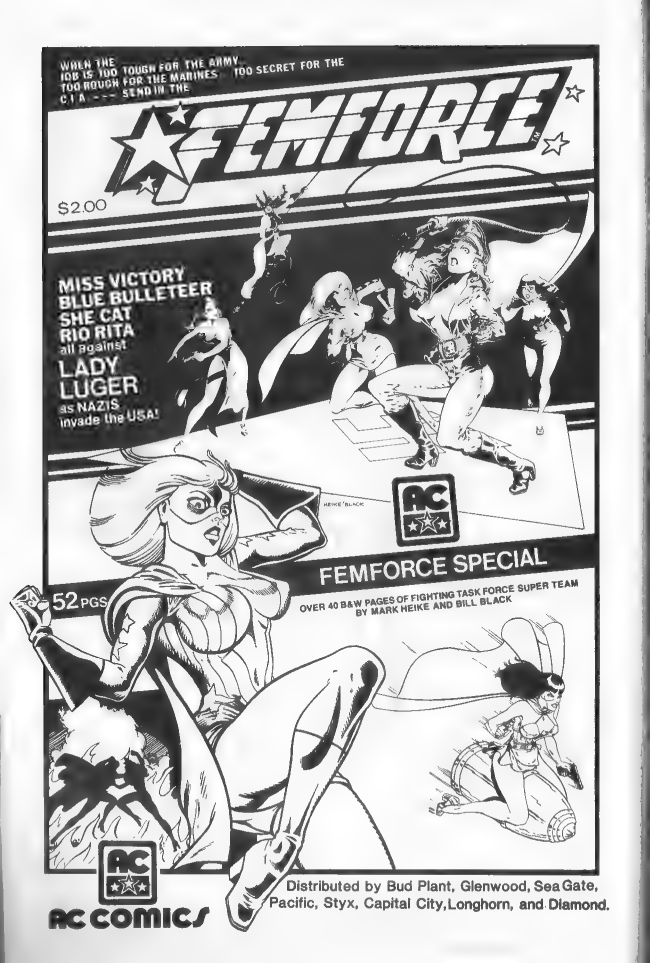
GARY: Well, not really.

DAK: *Are you going to continue — I mean, you're not softening up THE COMICS JOURNAL in its old age, are you?*

GARY: Do you perceive any softening in the editorial line?

DAK: *No.*

GARY: That's your answer then.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"THE PHANTOM was the object of quite a cult when I was growing up in Australia."

He comes from a land called Down Under — where the Ghost Who Walks is almost a national hero.

When I first met Ian Jack, he had recently emigrated from his native Australia to marry Barbara, his American fiancee, and to work as an accountant on Wall Street. I had just assumed assistant controllership of a company Ian was auditing. We worked closely together in the ensuing months, and during the course of that arduous audit, Ian — despite the pressures of adjusting to New York City — was always in good spirits, and quick to tell us amusing stories of life in Australia, from encounters with kangaroos to beer-drinking bouts to grueling cricket matches. And at times Jacko — as he's known to his friends — also shared his incredulity at the more bizarre aspects of American life, particularly his frustration with Manhattan's legendary "A" train.

I was particularly interested in Ian's love for THE PHANTOM, Lee Falk's classic jungle-adventure strip. In his comprehensive history, THE COMICS, Jerry Robinson calls The Phantom "the first costumed superhero." As Ian tells it, The Phantom is pretty much an obsession to a large percentage of Australia's sparse population. So, this spring, when Ian and Barbara (now "Mrs. Jacko") invited me to their home for a dinner of shrimps and crepes, I steered the conversation toward one of Ian's favorite subjects — the Masked Avenger of the Deep Woods . . .

LESLEY BENJAMIN: *Tell me about the comics you read in Australia, when you were a* bughaleen.

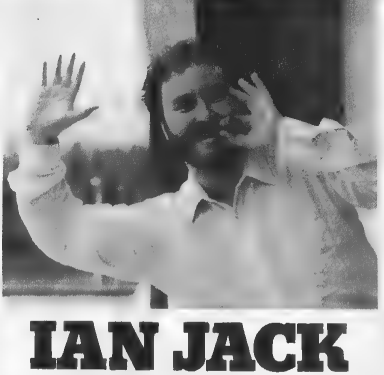
IAN JACK: A what?

LESLEY: *It's Irish for kid. It means "ankle-biter."* (Laughter.)

IAN: Oh, God — the two that I remember were SUPERMAN and THE PHANTOM.

LESLEY: *Were these comics American editions?*

IAN: SUPERMAN was the same publication that comes out over here. The Australian entertainment industry, including comic books, is a bit of a hybrid. You get a curious mixture of the American product with a little bit of the British and even lesser portion of the local product.



IAN JACK

LESLEY: *Was THE PHANTOM a newspaper strip, as it is over here?*

IAN: No, in Australia it appears in a comic book. I had the first four hundred issues, except for one that was missing — but that didn't really matter because I just liked to re-read the old stories. THE PHANTOM was the object of quite a cult when I was growing up. The ultimate achievement when I was a kid was getting your own PHANTOM ring. It was an ordinary ring with a skull on it — The Phantom's insignia. The last issue I saw was #608, and that was at an accounting conference, oddly enough. I was with two other accountants in a room in the hotel where the conference was being held. These two characters were a bit whacky — they spent the duration of the conference sitting in their room, swapping PHANTOM comics. I thought that a little bit strange — and funny, too. No one saw them outside the hotel room. They just sat in there with a three-foot high stack of comics! And they had their Phantom rings on. *(Laughter.)* I think their earliest issue was #150, and they knew nothing of what had gone on before because they thought the earlier issues were impossible to get. I said, "Oh, no, I have everything up to issue #400 at home." They were astonished. They said, "You're sitting on a gold mine!" *(Laughter.)*

LESLEY: *THE PHANTOM — like many adventure strips — isn't as widely syndicated in the USA as it used to be.*

VITAL STATISTICS

Name: Ian Duncan Jack (a.k.a. "Jacko")

Residence: Riogefield Park, New Jersey

Born: 22 November 1953 — Brisbane, Queensland, Australia

Pet Peeve: Riding the New York City subways.

Favorite Pastime: Drinking beer.

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"The nuns would confiscate our Phantom rings."

FOR THOSE WHO CAME IN LATE --
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FOUR HUNDRED YEARS AGO, A MAN WAS WASHED UP ON A REMOTE BENGAL SHORE. HE HAD SEEN HIS FATHER KILLED AND HIS SHIP SCUTTLED BY SINGH PIRATES....
-- TO DEVOTE MY LIFE TO THE DESTRUCTION OF ALL FORMS OF PIRACY, GREED AND CRUELTY.
1-30
HE SWORE AN OATH ON THE SKULL OF HIS FATHER'S MURERER. HE WAS THE FIRST PHANTOM, AND THE ELDEST MALE OF EACH SUCCEEDING GENERATION OF HIS FAMILY CARRIED ON.....

The Phantom's roots. All PHANTOM illustrations courtesy of Ken Pierce (P.O. Box 332, Park Forest, IL 60466), publisher of several collections of PHANTOM strips. Writing by Lee Falk, art by Ray Moore.

For the benefit of readers who may never have seen it, can you tell us something about it?

IAN: The man who became the original Phantom was shipwrecked by pirates centuries ago, in a mythical Afro-Asian jungle land where pygmies rescue him and nurse him back to health. He makes a vow on the skull of his father's murderer — this is where the skull comes in — that he will dedicate his life to fighting pirates and other evil-doers. He starts wearing this skin-tight costume that covers his entire body, and wears a mask so that his face will never be seen again by human beings. He passes this legacy — the costume, the fight against evil, and so on — down through the generations of Phantoms who succeed him. The current Phantom is about the twenty-first in a line of Phantoms. But the natives think it is the same guy, down through the centuries — hence his nick-name, "The Ghost Who Walks," which is what a phantom is, I guess. The continuing thread of the story centers pretty much on how the line of Phantoms is going to continue, because he seems to be a perpetual bachelor.

LESLEY: *Where does the ring come in?*

IAN: The Phantom is strong and athletic, and even in pre-Kung Fu days he could take on fifteen or twenty men at once and destroy them in three seconds. Whenever he strikes someone, they're left with the mark of the skull on their face, and they're forever marked and cursed. Wherever they go in the domain of the Phantom, they'll be shunned by the locals.

LESLEY: *Did you wear your Phantom ring to school?*

IAN: No, if you wore the ring to school it would be confiscated. I went to a parochial school, run by nuns. They didn't want any strong male figure entering into the lives of their babies. *(Laughter.)*

LESLEY: *Was THE PHANTOM popular among adults, too?*

IAN: A lot of the accountants I knew followed it. Every second week, when the book came out, the accountants would disappear from the office and take up the watch at the newsstand, waiting for the new issue to appear. Once in a while you'd hear screaming and cursing because the bastards had reprinted an old issue!

LESLEY: *So comics in Australia are sold at newsstands, as they are in America?*

IAN: Right. It's pretty much the same kind of situation — you can buy comics wherever you buy newspapers — at newsstands, in supermarkets, those kind of places.

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"The Australian way of life requires massive

LESLEY: *In America there's a direct market where there are stores devoted strictly to selling comic books.*

IAN: We don't have that. The whole market is pretty much controlled by one company, in terms of distribution. Someone I knew wanted to distribute a magazine, but unless they got an arrangement with this one company, they were pretty much finished. There are a lot of monopoly companies like that in Australia.

LESLEY: *Getting back to THE PHANTOM, is there still a continuing interest in it over there?*

IAN: Oh, definitely. I heard stories about how THE PHANTOM was affecting the lives of my friends even up to the time I left Australia in 1982. For example, a friend of mine, Bob, was in New Guinea, which is pretty much jungle, like the setting of THE PHANTOM. Now, the people of New Guinea are a fascinating lot. Reality as we see it, and reality as they see it, are two completely different things. For them, THE PHANTOM, although set in the jungle, is totally different from what they know, and fascinating to them. They're consumed by it. It's like the soaps in the USA. Well, in the comic the Phantom's abode is the Skull Cave. It's a cave which — as they keep saying in the stories — "through a fantastic natural phenomenon," is shaped like a human skull. So my friend, Bob, was walking through the jungles of New Guinea one day and stumbled on what he thought was the Skull Cave. It was probably just a bloody cave — he was drunk or something stupid like that. *(Laughter.)* He created a furor in the local community by telling the New Guineans that he'd found the Skull Cave. They were all looking for the bloody thing because they really believed that the Phantom exists.

LESLEY: *Were there any other comics you followed as a kid?*

IAN: Besides SUPERMAN, which I mentioned, there was BATMAN, and a lot of other comics that were real popular among kids, but they would come and go. The perennials are pretty much SUPERMAN and THE PHANTOM.

LESLEY: *How do Australians feel about sharing American superheroes?*

IAN: It's no different from the rest of our entertainment. The input of culture from the United States is just part of the Australian way of life. For example, the two most popular current-events magazines are TIME and NEWSWEEK. If you look at Australian television on any given day, you probably get forty percent American TV shows, forty percent BBC, and sixty percent Australian. *(Laughter.)*

LESLEY: *As an accountant, you've got problems!*

IAN: The Australian way of life requires massive imports, and that includes our television, as well as comics. There's no resentment of this. I grew up watching American television.

LESLEY: *What did you watch?*

IAN: PERRY MASON. Pretty much any shows that are successful in the USA are successful in Australia. M*A*S*H was probably as popular in Australia as it was here. In terms of background and development, Australia is like a younger version of the United States. It's a country of immigrants. A country of opportunity. A country of vast natural wealth. The European settlers came to Australia only about a hundred years ago, and the nation itself is only about eighty years old. So it's a very young country, which is used to being influenced by other countries. Yet it's fairly isolated, and because there's not much going on *per se* in the country itself, you have to go out and travel and get a look at the rest of the world to find out what's going on outside Australia. Which is basically the reason I'm here in the USA. Australians are great travellers.

LESLEY: *Coincidentally enough, as we're speaking, we're listening to Olivia Newton-John in the background. She and the Bee Gees and a number of pop-music heroes are from Australia.*

IAN: Well, they're all ex pats.

LESLEY: *And the Australian film industry has certainly made its impact on world culture.*

IAN: Yes, starting with PICNIC AT HANGING ROCK, I guess, and then followed by pictures such as MY BRILLIANT CAREER and THE ROAD WARRIOR.

LESLEY: *I was thinking of THE THORN BIRDS.*

IAN: Oh, well, that was an American film based on a book by an Australian author. She wrote a good tale of life in the Australian outback, plus a lot of shit about priests and that stuff, and then someone got a hold of it and made it into a stupid movie which was significant by its absence of flies.

LESLEY: *Flies?*

IAN: In that part of Australia, you're persistently being attacked by millions of flies, and while you're talking with someone, you have to constantly wipe the flies out of your eyes and mouth. They call it the Great Australian Salute. I think the film was shot in California and there were no flies.

LESLEY: *Maybe Rachel Ward objected to that bit of realism.*

IAN: I can imagine a close-up with her smiling and fourteen flies sitting on her teeth — which is how it would have

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The Masked King of the Jungle found his Queen in the 1930s — Diana Palmer, his long-suffering fiancee.

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imports, including television and comics."

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The Phantom fought his own war against the Japanese in World War II.

looked if it were done in Australia. Maybe a minor point, but the TV mini-series had no Australian flavor whatsoever.

LESLEY: *How about Mel Gibson? Does he speak Strine well?*

IAN: Not really. I don't think too many people have heard real good strong Strine spoken. "Strine" is the contraction for the Australian dialect. Which is part of the Australian way of speaking — to contract all that one says. Except when it's a short word — then you lengthen it. *(Laughter.)* My surname, Jack, is very short and therefore not good enough, so they call me "Jacko."

But — speaking of Australian movies — the film industry has been around in Australia for a number of years. In fact, I think the first motion picture ever made was filmed in Australia. It was based on a comic strip called DAN AND DAVE, which was about the "selectors," people who took the land from the squatters.

LESLEY: *What comic strips are popular in Australia in more recent years?*

IAN: PEANUTS is very popular. We have ANDY CAPP, which I've never liked. BLONDIE is my mother's favorite. I had a particular fondness for POGO, and was very upset when it was cancelled in Australia.

LESLEY: *Are there political cartoons?*

IAN: Yes, the Australian sense of humor lends itself very well to political humor. In fact, one of our cartoonists, **Rigby**, is over here now working for THE NEW YORK POST — fellow Australian **Rupert Murdoch's** contribution to American journalism. *(Laughter.)*

LESLEY: *What is the feeling in Australia about Murdoch?*

IAN: We're damned glad you've got him! *(Laughter.)* In Australia, he has one decent newspaper, THE AUSTRALIAN, but every other paper he owns in Australia is shit, like THE POST. But in his other newspapers, in Australia and England and everywhere else, he puts a naked woman on page three. In THE NEW YORK POST, he doesn't even put in the tits.

LESLEY: *A lot of Americans are thinking of moving to Australia and starting over. Do you have anything to say to them?*

IAN: I've experienced most of the trauma of living and working in New York City, but what amazed me most was how similar this country is to Australia. The similarities are more remarkable than the differences. I think Americans would find Australia a less threatening version of their own country. They don't have anything like the A-Train in Australia — I think there would be a law against it. Anyone who rides the New York City subways to and from work deserves combat pay! *(Laughter.)*

No, it's not Frosty the Snowman — it's the quick-thinking, wisecracking Ghost Who Walks.

PICK UP THEIR RIFLES, GAR. DON'T MOVE. YOU TWO!
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COMICS INTERVIEW A HUGE SUCCESS!

Dear David,

Congratulations on COMICS INTERVIEW #9. It was a huge success for us, too. We sold many more copies than on #8 and we did receive many inquiries from our ad that ran in that issue. We will be running another ad in your upcoming issues... Our subscription service is still growing by leaps and bounds and I am happy to hear that your company is doing well also.

Sherill J. Ayres
Westfield Comics
6515 Grand Teton Plaze
Madison, WI 53719

WOMEN IN COMICS

Dear Bill & DAK,

Enclosed is my check for my next six months of COMICS INTERVIEW. You guys didn't really think I was gonna abandon you, didja?

Your crop of interviews in #10 was, as usual, very interesting this month — but the best was the **Christy Marx** interview. Even though there are very few women writing comics right now, they're at least a talented bunch. Along with Christy, there's **Jo Duffy**, who spikes Marvel's STAR WARS with wry wit as well as gripping drama; and **Ann Nocenti**, who, aside from **Bruce Jones**, is one of the few comics writers who can take the **Serling**-esque approach to short stories and really make it seem fresh and different. Interviews with either (or both) of these gifted ladies would be most appreciated.

Whoops! I seem to be getting on my "feminist" soapbox again (please send my apologies to **Barry Dutter**). So I'll try to balance things out with a few more requests. How about **Arn Saba, Armando Gil** (easily Marvel's most underrated inker), **Gene Colan, Scott McCloud, Matt Wagner, Roger Stern, Charles Dixon & Judith Hunt**, the aforementioned **Bruce Jones, Max Collins & Terry Beatty**, or **Ken Bruzenak**. (This is really stretchin' the word "few." Sorry, guys.)

Anyway, thanks for all the past months of great reading and all the ones yet to come. You're the greatest.

Amy Sacks
Deal Park, NJ

THERE'S ALWAYS A FIRST TIME

Dear folks —

Recently I purchased COMICS INTERVIEW for the first time. I must say, I did not know what I was missing.

Thank you for the **Christy Marx** interview. I hope you will interview more women in comics — especially writers — in future issues.

Jean Frame
RD #1 – Box 359
Glenmoore, PA 19343

When it comes to women in comics, Jean, we here at COMICS INTERVIEW are all for 'em — and if you are especially interested in women writers, then by all means check out our interview with Louise Simonson in #12, if you haven't read it already. And, even though she's an artist rather than a writer, you ought to enjoy our interview with Colleen Doran of A DISTANT SOIL!

— DAK

SHE-HULK DEGRADING TO WOMEN?

Dear DAK:

I was going to criticize COMICS INTERVIEW #11 for not having any anti-She-Hulk comments in it. After all, tirades

CHRISTY MARX

Photos: Peter Ledger

against the Green Woman are one thing I've come to really look forward to in this mag. COMICS INTERVIEW just isn't complete without them.

Then I saw your "Fan On The Street" interview with **Meloney Crawford**, and that just made my day. **Crawford** said that SHE-HULK comics "exploit women" and that the character "prefers to run around as a giant green nymphomaniac." In essence, **Crawford** seemed to feel that She-Hulk was degrading to women.

To this I can only add that She-Hulk is also degrading to men. For that matter, she's also degrading to Marvel Comics, as well as the whole comics industry in general. She-Hulk is single-handedly giving comics a bad name.

Crawford's comments are just the type of thing I like to see in COMICS INTERVIEW. **Meloney Crawford** can now consider herself an honorary member of the Committee to Wipe the She-Hulk Off the Face of the Earth. Welcome aboard, Meloney — glad to have you on our side.

We'll lick that Green Menace yet!

Barry Dutter
2283 Old Farm Road
Scotch Plains, NJ 07076

A NEW LOW FOR MARVEL

Dear David:

In issue #12 of COMICS INTERVIEW there was an interview with **Louise Jones**. It was accompanied by a little drawing of her which I instantly recognized as drawn by **Walt Simonson**. But on the side of the page I was shocked to see her face copyrighted by Marvel Comics! My God, can't a person own his own face anymore?! Truly, this is a new low for Marvel Comics and I wonder what **Jones** feels about this.

Jose Carlos Davila
765 Grand Street
Brooklyn, NY 11211

A POWER BLAST!

Dear Mr. David Anthony Kraft:

A friend of mine (**Carl Macek**, who used to write for **Steranko**) informed me that I'd been mentioned in your magazine, so I picked the issues up mainly because no one has written about my work here in the USA. Mind you, my comic book work here is limited to having helped **Rick Hoberg** and **Dave Stevens** out of a jam on a Marvel Comics WHAT IF — ? in '79 about MASTER OF KUNG FU...as did the rest of the animation layout department at Hanna-Barbera. It was fun for all involved! And the others have been my ROCK WARRIOR, which was done in four days, plus two extra days for the pin-up in SKATE MAN #1, which was drawn in a hurry two years ago for Pacific Comics! While I liked to be thought of by **Scroggy**, my concept of the Rock Warrior and his involvement in rock'n'roll is only one aspect of my hero. A five page story with, I might add, a beginning, middle and an end, was not enough to establish a new hero — let alone a rock'n'roll concept! Don't get me wrong, I ain't bitching. I'm glad they took a chance on a comic-book unknown like me (in this country at least)!

Tod Smith's comments regarding my work (in INTERVIEW #7) being too cartoony I object to...so in defense I've enclosed some art. I didn't enjoy doing the OMEGA MEN #8 -- it was stupid! I'm currently working on a Disney film, or I should say a Touchstone Film — a very un-Disney project titled MY SCIENCE PROJECT, directed by **Jon Betual**. I've been a motion picture illustrator (storyboards, production paintings and graphic design) for the past 15 years. Also just did the graphic design for **John Millius** RED DAWN from MGM. It has independent comics in some scenes! I worked for both **Alex Toth** and **John**

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Dixon on and off for seven years on AIR HAWK!

I'm working on a live action ROCK WARRIOR movie, as well. All I'm trying to say is thanks for the mention in your book, but I sure wish somebody would look at my stuff in comics and ask for my opinion. I think I work hard and do a good job. You see I really enjoy a well-written story (a must!!) which comics lack, except for the Brits and some of the US comic writers (the best for me is **Leonard Starr**)!

Cheers and thanks.

Paul S. Power
Power Art and Design
6404 Hollywood Blvd
Suite #403
Hollywood, CA 90028

MARVEL ALSO PUTS OUT GOOD STUFF

DAK:

Yes, Marvel does put out crap. But so does DC, Pacific, Eclipse, Americomics, Red Circle, and others I've forgotten. But Marvel also puts out good stuff, as well as DC, Pacific and the rest. Anyone that decides to boycott a company because he doesn't like its editor should be chastized, himself. Sort of like boycotting the Olympics because you don't like what's-his-name that runs the country they'll be at.

Actually, I take back that chastizing bit **Mr. Smith** should be pitied, because he is missing a lot, judging by his letter in COMICS INTERVIEW #12. THOR is better than it's been before. X-MEN and NEW MUTANTS are both steadily rising out of slumps they've been in recently. Many of Marvel's mini-series are really good.

You can't judge a (comic) book by its cover. But I wonder if **Mr. Smith** has ever read GI JOE or DAZZLER or MICRONAUTS or ROM, or has he simply not even bothered because they're based on stupid ideas? All four are really quite good.

I think the trouble at Marvel is that since **Mr. Shooter** stopped writing THE AVENGERS, in 1982, he has started running the company as if it were simply there to make money, rather than to entertain. This would explain things like US I, CRYSTAR and the totally horrid SECRET WARS. But on most of the books, you can see the creators' efforts to do good shining through.

So if **Mr. Shooter** is reading this, I would suggest you (**Shooter**) go out and buy as many of this month's Marvels as you can find. That's right. Buy them. Buy them all. Then sit down and read each and every one of them, not as editor-in-chief of the company making these books, but as a fan with some money to buy some books. See if these books are worth your hard-earned money.

If **Mr. Smith** is reading this, I suggest you try the same. At least, try the books I named. Read them as if these were the first Marvels you've ever gotten. Feel free to contact me. I'll send you back a nice, neat, well thought-out reply to anything you say.

Thank you, Dave, for letting me speak my mind.

Mike Grabowski
119 Rutherford
Redwood City, CA 94061

LOVES GARCIA LOPEZ

Dear Dave,

I may have missed a few issues of COMICS INTERVIEW — but, as of late, I've been a steady reader. I actually waited as eagerly for the current issue as for any of my favorite comics, themselves. I've been a **Garcia Lopez** fan since around '78 or so. I have long considered him to be one of my very favorites, and by far the most underrated artist working in comics today. I think his best work was his SUPERMAN. Not to take away from **Curt Swan, Murphy Anderson,** or any other artist who's worked on the character, but Jose's SUPERMAN was always the very best! And when the Superman movies came around, Jose's Superman captured a lot of that youthful look **Christopher Reeve** brought to the Man of Steel. His Deadman was just as good as **Adams'**, and his Batman, his Wonder Woman, and now his Atari Force...well, you get the point. The man is a genius and I hope he soon gets that recognition and acclaim that's been deserved for so long. I believe he will, when he fills in on THE TEEN TITANS for **George Perez**. Good luck, Jose!

I also awaited the **Alan Moore** interview. Alan and SWAMP THING are both tops in my book. I am proud to say that I was hooked on Swampy back when **Marty Pasko** wrote, thanks to that tremendous art, but now the mysterious writing of **Mr. Moore** really has the book soaring. I think it's safe to say this one of comicdom's premiere efforts. I hope that everyone notices. I do have to admit, though, that it's fun having a favorite book that's not gawked over like THE X-MEN. When everyone hops on the bandwagon — well, it gets a bit crowded, I suppose.

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FAN-BLOODY-TAS-TIC, MATE!
THERE HE IS, PROFESSOR. THE ONLY CARTOONIST I KNOW WHO WANTED TO BE A GOOD BOXER. HEY, PAUL, TAKE A BREAK. I HAVE A MESSAGE FOR YOU!
AHH... A BEAUTIFUL RIGHT CROSS. THE LITTLE GUY HITS HARD, PAUL! YET, ITS STILL STRANGE TO POWERFUL SLASH! ARTISTS!
THUD!
HELLO MISTER POWER. GLAD TO MEET YOU! EXCUSE ME, BUT I'M ASKING EVERYONE WHO'S GOING IN A MAGICAL RING AND HELL THOUGHT YOU WOULD BE ASSOCIATING WITH OTHER ARTISTS, OR AM I JUST BEING WEIRD?
GA'DN! PROFESSOR, CAN PLEASE GO TO MEET?
NO! I FOUND THE CARDBOARD'S A LOT EASIER TO ASSAULT WITH TO THE ASSETT-TIGERS. NONE OF THAT HERO BEGGING. THIS IS GOOD FOR ME!
SEE PAUL—I TOLD YOU IT'S THE SAME DRAWING AS CONAN. THINK I'M GOING TO BE THE LAST MEETS WEST COMIC STAR?
IT'S A NICE REPLICA, OH, WHERE DID YOU HAVE IT MADE?
I FOUND IT ON A RIG IN TAIWON NEZUMA IN RABE... OH! NEVER MIDDLEON AUGHST FOURTH.
WAIT A MINUTE. YOU'RE NOT JOKING! THIS IS REALLY THINK I'M GOING TO BE THE ONLY ONE WHO WON'T BELIEVE THIS? I'M LEAVING!
DANGER!? DOES IT HAVE A COMIC BOOK AND A GALAXIAN SWORD? EDDIE THINKS THESE FRIENDS HERE IN WEE BIT, DRUNK!
WE'RE IN GREAT DANGER!!
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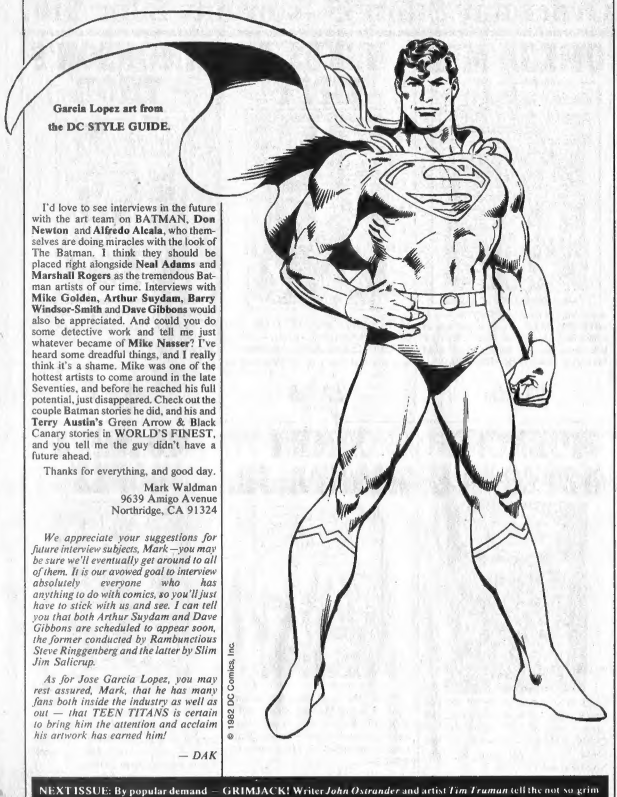

Garcia Lopez art from the DC STYLE GUIDE.

I'd love to see interviews in the future with the art team on BATMAN, **Don Newton** and **Alfredo Alcala**, who themselves are doing miracles with the look of The Batman. I think they should be placed right alongside **Neal Adams** and **Marshall Rogers** as the tremendous Batman artists of our time. Interviews with **Mike Golden, Arthur Suydam, Barry Windsor-Smith** and **Dave Gibbons** would also be appreciated. And could you do some detective work and tell me just whatever became of **Mike Nasser**? I've heard some dreadful things, and I really think it's a shame. Mike was one of the hottest artists to come around in the late Seventies, and before he reached his full potential, just disappeared. Check out the couple Batman stories he did, and his and **Terry Austin's** Green Arrow & Black Canary stories in WORLD'S FINEST, and you tell me the guy didn't have a future ahead.

Thanks for everything, and good day.

Mark Waldman
9639 Amigo Avenue
Northridge, CA 91324

We appreciate your suggestions for future interview subjects, Mark—you may be sure we'll eventually get around to all of them. It is our avowed goal to interview absolutely everyone who has anything to do with comics, so you'll just have to stick with us and see. I can tell you that both Arthur Suydam and Dave Gibbons are scheduled to appear soon, the former conducted by Rambunctious Steve Ringgenberg and the latter by Slim Jim Salicrup.

As for Jose Garcia Lopez, you may rest assured, Mark, that he has many fans both inside the industry as well as out — that TEEN TITANS is certain to bring him the attention and acclaim his artwork has earned him!

— DAK

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NEXT ISSUE: By popular demand — GRIMJACK! Writer *John Ostrander* and artist *Tim Truman* tell the not so grim story behind comics' most popular cut-throat! Plus: artist *Val Mayerik* talks about fights in comics and his collaborations with *Steve Gerber* from HOWARD THE DUCK to VOID INDIGO! *Colleen Doran* (A DISTANT SOIL) and *Richard Pini* answer the question: Is there life after ELFQUEST? Much more! And a dramatic GRIMJACK cover by *Truman*! Don't miss COMICS INTERVIEW #15!

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